

# READING ABBEY CHANCEL

THE ABBOT'S PLACE IN CHOIR

AND

THE TOMB OF HENRY I

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## READING ABBEY - THE LITURGICAL SPACES OF ITS EAST END

The reopening of the ruins of Reading Abbey in 2018 created renewed interest not just in the Abbey buildings but in the role of the monastery in the history of the town. Many talks and conferences have taken place informing the public about the Abbey's history. Moreover several books and pamphlets have been published, all of which have added to our knowledge of the Abbey. Among these a most important selection of primary evidence was made publicly available in 2018 with the publication of the *Reading Abbey Records, a new miscellany*, edited by Professor Brian Kemp. This includes previously unpublished *Annals* and a reprint of Kemp's translation of the *Miracles of the Hand of St James*, but now with their Latin version. The book also includes a previously unknown document concerning the ritual surrounding the annual, and monthly, commemoration of the Abbey's founder, Henry I.

Over the last few years I have been working on aspects of the Abbey's connection with Cluny, its founding monastery. This has included the publication on the internet of information about some music in the Douai Abbey library, dating to the 12th century. At the request of the Abbot of Douai, Geoffrey Scott, Lindsay Mullaney and I also worked on an early 17th book, the *Apostolatus Benedictinorum*. Written in Latin, this was published in 1627, and is an account of the Benedictine order in England from the early Middle Ages up to the Reformation and even beyond. It contains several references to Reading.

A mass of information has been accrued from sources covering historical records, archaeology, the arts and architecture. This piece of work looks at what we know about the appearance of the interior of the east end of the church and how the space was used. I shall also offer alternative interpretations concerning this where no firm conclusions are possible. I will conclude with an evaluation of the evidence relating to the location of Henry's tomb.

What I wrote here should be read alongside my earlier analysis of the East End of the Abbey church. Some of these more recent findings may be used to modify and add to the information in my earlier document. ([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1\\_i7KpSBWg-AYGuSbASXY6PrEoZ1Enotk/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_i7KpSBWg-AYGuSbASXY6PrEoZ1Enotk/view))

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## **Primary Sources**

*From among the primary sources I would like to highlight the following six items. Number 4 is mentioned only out of interest, as the Reading Abbey rubrics are attached to the end of this manuscript.*

1. Cluny 'customaries' such as that of Ulrich and Bernard and the *Liber tramitis*. These give us information about Cluny. To what extent they were reflected at Reading is a matter for debate and speculation.
2. *Orderic Vitalis Bk X1 Ch XL111* <https://archive.org/stream/ecclesiasticalhi03orde#page/438/mode/2up> (See especially Henry admitted to the Community of St Evroult 1113 Feb 3, Feast of the Purification of Mary, Candlemas Feb 2)
3. *Reading Abbey Cartularies* ed B Kemp
4. *Reading Abbey Records a new miscellany*, B Kemp 2018—commentary and originals
5. *Summa de Dictamine* or *Summa Dictaminis* Guido Fava c 1190-1243 [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/guido-fava\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/guido-fava_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/) Now BL Add ms 8167
6. *The Visitation of Berkshire in 1532* Thomas Benolt. (British Library Add ms 12479 Oswald Barron)

## **Secondary Sources**

*From among the many secondary sources concerning the topics covered, I would like to draw the reader's particular attention to the following:*

1. *A medieval Latin Death Ritual* Frederick Paxton which includes in translation the Cluniac customaries of the *Vetus disciplina monastica* and the *Consuetudines*
2. *Clergy Seating through the Centuries Part II — The Enclosed Choir in the Medieval Cathedrals and Abbeys* Daniel DeGreve
3. *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, (CRSBI) website <https://www.crsbi.ac.uk/>.
4. *From Dead of Night to End of Day: the Medieval Customs of Cluny*, ed. Susan Boynton and Isabelle Cochelin
5. *Monasticism without Frontiers: the extended monastic community of the abbot of Cluny in England and Wales*. C. P. Pearce
6. *Histoire de l'ordre de Cluny* Vol 3 J Henri Pignot
7. *Reading Abbey (1901)* J B Hurry
8. *Reading Abbey Records a new miscellany*, B Kemp 2018
9. *Sedilia* - James Alexander Cameron <http://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-6/english-sedilia#figure3> and <https://courtauld.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/7.-Cameron-Revisiting-The-Monument-CBO.pdf> (especially page 141)
10. *The Royal Abbey of Reading* R Baxter
11. *Wood Carvings in English Churches* Francis Bond

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

GPR - Gound Penetrating Radar survey

*Abbey Records* - *Reading Abbey Records a new miscellany*, B Kemp 2018

## PART 1 - ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE EAST END OF THE CHURCH

### PLAN OF THE EAST END OF READING ABBEY CHURCH

1. Ambulatory

The Chancel

2. High Altar

3. Presbytery

4. Choir—east end

5. Choir—west end

The Transepts, Aisles and Nave

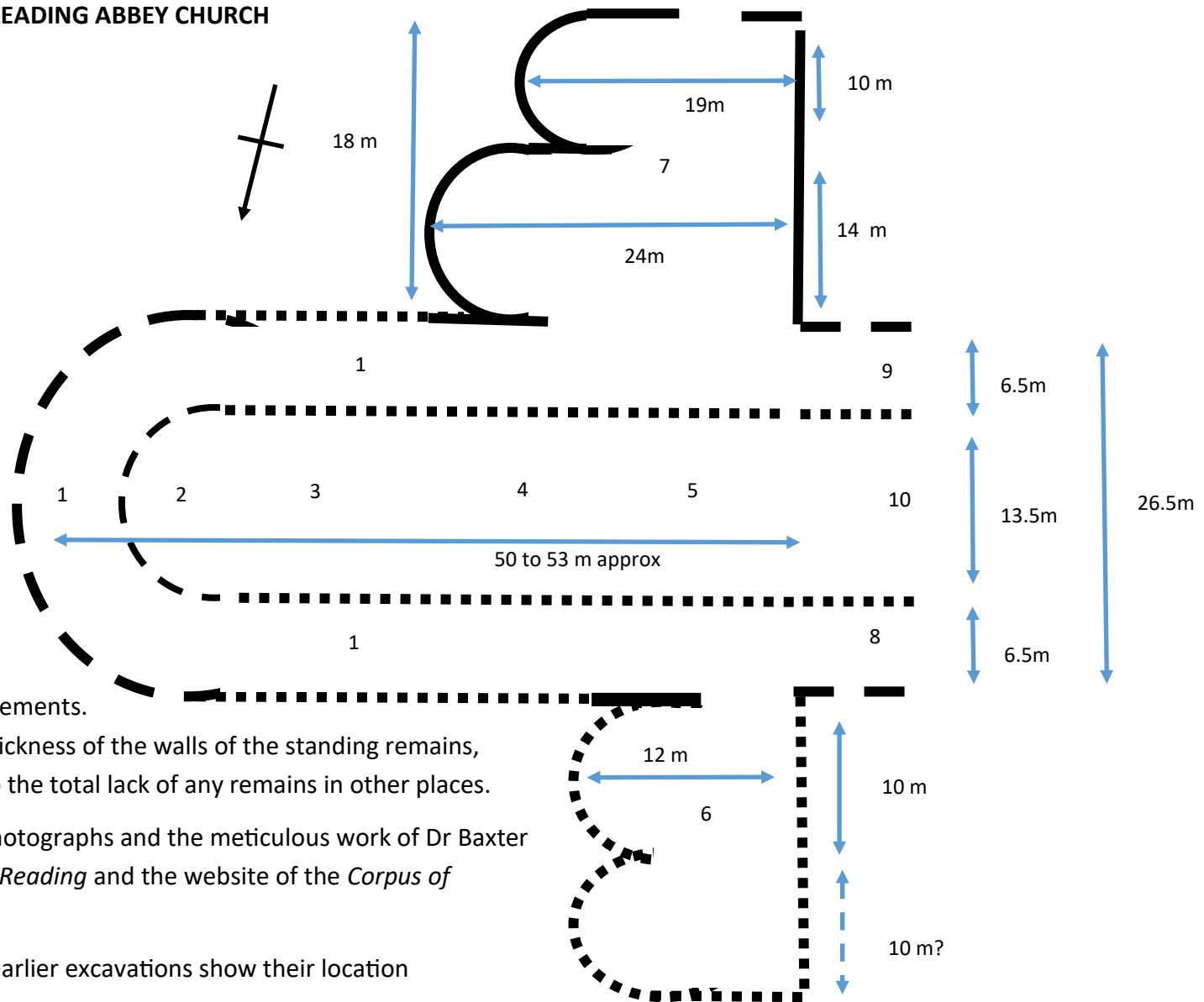
6. North Transept

7. South Transept

8. North aisle

9. South aisle

10. East end of the nave



### NOTE ABOUT THE MEASUREMENTS

Allow up to 1 to 2 metres tolerance in these measurements.

This is due to differing factors such as the varying thickness of the walls of the standing remains, (mostly due to the robbing of flint and stone) and to the total lack of any remains in other places.

The measurements are based upon Google-earth photographs and the meticulous work of Dr Baxter which may be found in his book *The Royal Abbey of Reading* and the website of the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*.

DASHES indicate no standing remains but GPR and earlier excavations show their location

DOTS indicate few, or no, remains or archaeological evidence

SOLID LINES indicate standing ruins

## THE NUMBERING ON THE PLAN

**NUMBER 1**, and then **NUMBERS 6 TO 10** are merely the architectural terms for the areas indicated. I shall look at these areas after examining the chancel - numbers 2 to 5.

## THE CHANCEL

### NUMBERS 2 TO 5

The most sacred part of the church was where the liturgical ceremonies took place. In some of the earliest Christian churches this was separated from the rest of the internal space by a low barrier called a templon. In time this structure became more substantial, the area became screened off and entry was through a gate, or lattice work screen, in Latin *cancellus*. And so the whole area was called the chancel. The area immediately around the altar became known as the 'sanctuary' which means holy place. The term 'presbytery', or priests' section, was also applied to the whole area, though sometimes more specifically to the sanctuary or to the open space in front of it. In this work, for the sake of clarity, I am going to distinguish the various parts of the chancel according to their liturgical usage. So on the plan, number 2, where the altar lies, is the sanctuary. To its west comes the presbytery, number 3, and further west still the choir, numbers 4 and 5. By the 12th century this had become the standard division of most large churches in western Christendom.

### NUMBER 2 THE HIGH ALTAR IN THE SANCTUARY

There has been quite a bit of discussion about the position of the High Altar in Reading Abbey. The reason for the discussion is the often repeated statement, by Gervase of Canterbury, that Henry had been buried in front of the High Altar (*ante altare sepultum est*). There has been some suggestion that an archaeological excavation could help identify the altar's exact location. In fact the altar would have been on a raised area, accessed by some steps, usually three, from the presbytery. It would not have had any foundations. Moreover there is no evidence that it stood above a crypt containing the bones of a saint. Some altars were so built. Had this been the case it would have given an indication of the High Altar's position at Reading. Consequently no amount of excavation will reveal its location. On the other hand, by comparing the design of Reading with other Romanesque churches, especially those with Cluniac influences, it is possible to come to an informed conclusion about its positioning.

To begin with it is necessary to examine the area of the apse. It is semi-circular, with a diameter equal to that of the nave of the church, namely about 13.5 metres. Its radius, therefore, is approximately 6.75m. The altar would have been placed on a cord of the semi circle, within the radius of the apse; the high altar's position in comparable Romanesque monasteries. One possible position would have been close to the rear wall. The altar slab itself would have been at least 1 metre from front to back, and stood somewhat proud of the apse rear wall. We shall see that Dr Slade, in his excavations of the 1970s, placed the altar in this position, as did the Ordnance Survey map of the 1870s which was based on Albury's work in the 19th century. Alternatively it could have stood further west, within the cord of the apse semi circle. There is also the possibility that it could have stood even further west, still within



St. Clements, Rome. *Templon*

the area marked as 2 on the diagram. One reason for postulating these latter two possibilities is that we know that Cluniac records say that the monks 'circled' the altar when censuring it. This would have required quite a bit of space. It has been suggested that having located the altar one could then make a reasonable estimate as to the location of Henry's tomb. I shall examine this theory later.

### NUMBERS 3, 4 AND 5



Beverley Minster. Early 16th century choir stalls in three tiers with an access point to the rear stalls in the middle. The back row has elaborate canopies, whilst the front row is a simple bench.

#### THE CHOIR

It is not possible to be sure as to the exact demarcation points in the chancel for numbers 3 to 5. We can be certain that to the west of the altar there would have been an open space for the liturgical ceremonies, usually referred to as the presbytery, and marked as number 3 on the plan. This would have led onto the choir to its west.

The choir itself may have been divided into segments. There were usually two of these, with an access point to the back stalls about half way along. This also served as a wider space, between the two lines of stalls, where the great lectern could be placed. The stalls were normally in three tiers. Those to the rear were allocated to more senior members of the community. From an early period these most probably had individual stalls, (*stalli*), rather than consisting of mere benches

As the centuries passed the stalls became ever more elaborate, with canopies and highly decorated carvings. The front row was often a simple bench and was used by the most junior members of the

monastic community, such as novices and trainee choristers. The Cluniac customs specifically mention this sort of seating and warn against intimate contact between the monks, even to the extent of not allowing their habits to touch. Customs, or *consuetudines* in Latin, were the practical rule books for individual monasteries.

A large lectern, possibly double sided, would have stood either in the choir, as mentioned above, or in the presbytery. The cantors would have led the chants. Each week the lead role passed from one side of the choir to the next. The *hebdomidarius* (weekly cantor) would have sung the antiphons; the complicated introductory verses to the psalms and canticles. The choir monks would then have chanted the verses, alternating from side to side. It is necessary to keep in mind that we are looking at a period spanning 400 years. There were many changes and developments in the arts, music and architecture over this timespan. Not least amongst the latter at Reading, was the addition of the Lady Chapel in 1314. This would have had a major impact on the liturgy and the daily routine of the Abbey.

According to Dr Hurry in *Reading Abbey 1901* and Pignot in his *Histoire de l'ordre de Cluny*, Reading Abbey was built to accommodate 200 monks. It is unlikely that this figure was often, if ever, attained. In 1305 there were only sixty five brothers, although by 1377 there were one hundred.

Most, but not all, of the community would have been choir monks. In the Cluniac customs we read that those monks who could not sing were to be fully involved in other aspects of the ceremonial, as candle bearers, thurifers and in other liturgical offices. Even though not active singers of the more complicated pieces of music, they would most likely have had places in the choir, chanting, or more unusually speaking, the simpler parts.

Allowing for this maximum number of choir places, and allotting about 750cm to each monk's stall, we are able to estimate the length of the choir area, with 100 places on both the north and south sides. If there were three rows then the overall length would have been about 25 metres. With this number of places to fit into the church it is unlikely that there would have been only two rows. If this had been the case then the choir would have impinged on the presbytery and almost reached the altar.

Two words are used in the *Abbey Records* to describe the seating. These are *forme* and *sedile*. The words *formae*, or *formulae*, (their earlier spellings), can be found used in the records of the monastery of St Gall, the earliest known monastic plan, dating to the 9th century. This type of seat had backs, but without divisions. In the 11th century the introduction of separating arms resulted in stalls (*stalli*), and this term is used in the *Abbey Records* when referring to the Abbot's place in the choir. We also read that the Abbot had a *sedile*. This is normally just translated as a seat. However it may refer to a special chair or throne, as described by Daniel DeGreve in his work about clergy seating in the middle ages.

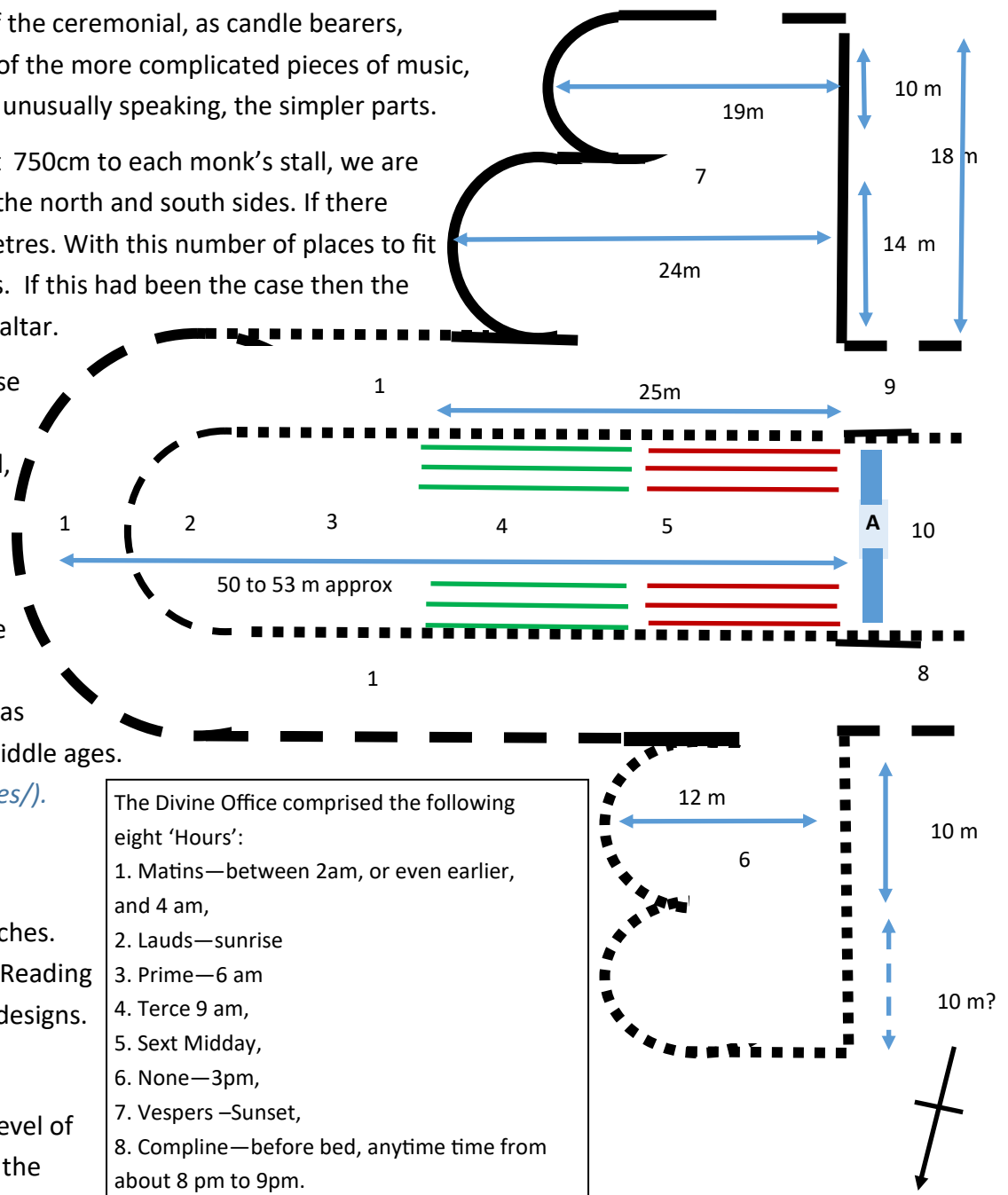
(<https://adoremus.org/2014/08/15/Clergy-Seating-through-the-Centuries/>).

I will be examining this importance of the word *sedile* shortly.

We need to be cautious about being too definitive concerning the uses of these terms. It is possible that some of the seats were just benches. However in such a prestigious monastery it is likely that the seating at Reading would have been both highly ornamented and according to the latest designs.

### The Presbytery

This whole chancel area would probably have been raised above the level of the nave and surrounding ambulatory. I have already pointed out that the



The Divine Office comprised the following eight 'Hours':

1. Matins—between 2am, or even earlier, and 4 am,
2. Lauds—sunrise
3. Prime—6 am
4. Terce 9 am,
5. Sext Midday,
6. None—3pm,
7. Vespers –Sunset,
8. Compline—before bed, anytime time from about 8 pm to 9pm.



altar would likewise have been higher than the level of the presbytery, which in turn may have been higher than the choir, though this was not always the case. In the *Abbey Records* there is mention of a pavement. This can be open to various interpretations which I shall look at later. The presbytery was therefore a large open space between the altar and the choir where much of the liturgical ceremony would have been enacted.



'Bugia' or candleholder.

The principal liturgical act was the Mass. The High Altar was the focus of this re-enactment of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It consisted of elaborate ceremonial, focusing on Biblical readings from the New and Old Testaments, followed by the Eucharist. The word means 'thanksgiving' and it is a devotion of gratitude for Christ's act of dying which brought Salvation from eternal death to mankind. The word 'eucharist' is used in the earliest of known Christian liturgies dating to the first centuries AD.

It should be noted that Slade pointed out a potential position of the high altar and stated that the area had been destroyed, probably when the Gaol was being built in the 1840s. However the GPR survey did reveal features not seen by Slade. These include what may be graves near the High Altar. There were also anomalous traces which may, or may not, reference Abbey remains.

The ceremonial of both the Mass and the Office, at Reading, was so elaborate that it involved many participants. The presiding priest would have been assisted by a deacon and sub deacon accompanied by other clergy. As we read in the *Abbey Records*, monks in copes, as many as six of which are mentioned at one point, would have been taking part. These in turn would have been accompanied by acolytes, at least two per 'coped' monk and most probably at least two thurifers. There would most likely have been more. For example, though not mentioned in the *Abbey Records*, probably because the readers would have known this, there would have been a nominated candle bearer for each reader. Later this became purely ceremonial but it was necessary in the days before gas or electric lighting. In short a large open area in front of the altar was an essential element in the church plan and the only method of lighting this was with candles.

In the case of any Benedictine monastery, and especially one following the Cluniac tradition, the ceremonies would have been very elaborate. They would have been accompanied by complicated and lengthy chants, with incense and candles and processions through the church, many starting from the Chapter House, but sometimes from the town. These would have been spectacles to inspire the onlookers, pilgrims and townspeople alike. Although the Chancel was cut off from the main body of the church, including the ambulatory, the colour, sounds and perfumes would have pervaded the whole church.

We read in the *Abbey Records* that at specified times bells were rung inside and outside the church. It was not just the material fabric of the church that was built to impress; the whole ceremonial was designed to inspire all comers with the magnificence of this, the entrance to the New Jerusalem. The presbytery with its ceremonials, was the beating heart of the liturgy but it was just one part of it. High Mass would have been sung daily after the Office Hour of Sext at midday. But this has to be placed in the context of the whole liturgy, or *Opus Dei*, the "Work of God", which was dominated by the singing of the Divine Office, which was done mainly in the Choir of the church. The exact timings of some of these 'hours' depended on the season of the year and the length of day. In addition, in Cluniac monasteries, it had become the custom to sing the appropriate 'hour' from the 'Office for the Dead' after each hour of the Office of the day. As devotion towards Mary, mother of Jesus, grew, it was also normal to include the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



In addition to about eight hours a day in choir the monks would have spent many hours studying, writing and practising the psalms and other items to be sung. It can be seen that long hours were spent in the choir. For this reason, early on in monastic history, it was agreed that there should be benches and eventually seats where the monks, though standing, could rest, half sitting, on the so called 'mercy seats' or misericords.

Just as the chancel served a liturgical purpose so too did these other areas, such as the transepts and the ambulatory. As with many Cluniac monasteries, Reading was a pilgrim church. Visitation records of Cluniac monasteries consistently examine and report on two areas of primary importance. The first was the correct celebration of the liturgy, and what we may term the internal running, of the monastery. This included the saying of Masses, the rule of silence, the proper observation of the liturgy, the *Opus Dei*, comportment at meal times and so on. But, second, and of equal importance, were the requirements of hospitality, almsgiving and general care for the poor. The visitation reports of another Cluniac monastery, Bermondsey, of 1262 supply just one example of how important these were seen to be and how strictly they were enforced. Care for the poor was paramount. We also read about this in the *Reading Records*, as when we see the detailed instructions concerning the distribution of charity, specifically food, known as orts, in connection with the commemoration of Henry's death, which took place not just annually but every month.

Reading was designed as a pilgrim church. Its large nave welcomed visitors who could circulate round the building. Probably entering by the northerly west end door, groups or individuals would circulate round the church, no doubt stopping to make their devotions at one side altar or another. They would pass through the north transept with its larger altars, which probably displayed a relic or at least some saintly or angelic image. The sun filtering through the colours of the stained glass windows would mix with the sound of the monks chanting in the chancel and with the warmth and smoke of the beeswax candles swirling round the church, mingling with the perfume of the incense, rising heavenwards. The pilgrims would then continue their way behind the chancel by way of the ambulatory, and so to the south transept, down the south aisle to exit onto the garth, or green, in front of the west doors.

In the south transept there are two apsidal chapels, the more northerly being larger than the other. Could it be that this was the chapel which held the shrine to St James? We read in Miracle XIII of the *Miracles of the Hand of St James*, that there was such an altar and that it had a picture of the saint. If so, most probably, the relic of the Hand of St James would have been brought there on special occasions, such as his feast day, July 25th. That the visitor and pilgrim was not segregated at all times, at least in the 12th century, from the holiest part of the church, the chancel, is amply demonstrated in several of the miracles of the Hand of St James. In other words the chancel, though reserved for monastic liturgical use during services, was also open for lay pilgrims, including women. Several of the stories tell of monks helping sick pilgrims by bringing them into the chancel.

The ambulatory, which allowed for the circulation of pilgrims round the church, also featured in the ceremonial of the Abbey. The Cluniac tradition extolled the spiritual value of processions. These were viewed as mini pilgrimages which, like all pilgrimages, symbolised the journey through life. And just as the journey of life has an end, so too the processions ended, probably at one of the many shrines in the Abbey church, with a concluding ritual promising the forgiveness of sins and eternal joy. 'Salvation', symbolised by this type of ceremonial, was the eschatological purpose of the monastery and of a monk's life.

## NUMBERS 1, 6 AND 7 THE AMBULATORY AND TRANSEPTS

Fig 1 shows how the chancel (numbers 2 to 5) was encircled by a passageway or ambulatory (number 1). This led to the transepts (numbers 6 and 7), and ultimately to the nave and aisles of the church (numbers 8, 9 and 10). Dr Slade excavated this area in the 1970s (Fig 2) (*Berkshire Archaeological Journal* - BAJ - Vol 68) and the 2012 Ground Penetrating Survey - GPR - (Fig 3) confirmed aspects of his findings.

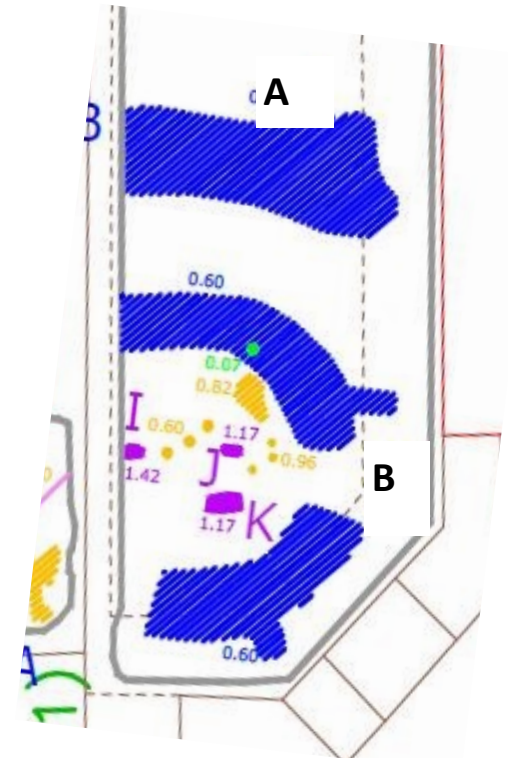
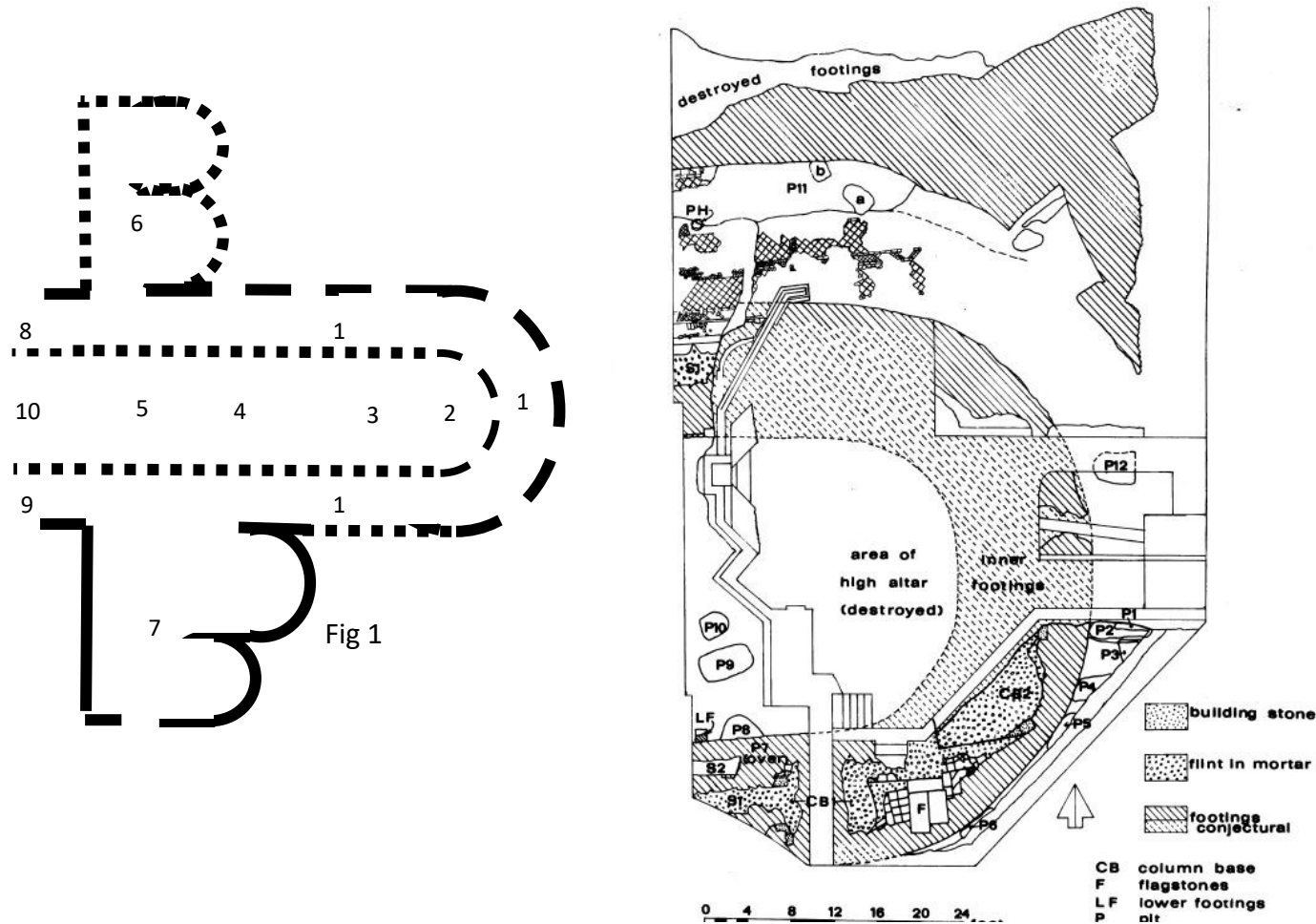


Fig 3

GPR survey

A Outer ambulatory wall.

B Inner wall

For full account see [www.readingabbeyhistory.com](http://www.readingabbeyhistory.com)  
or <https://drive.google.com/drive/my-drive>

Fig 2 Dr Slade's excavations 1970s (BAJ Vol 68)

## PART 2 - DETAILED EXAMINATION OF THE DESIGN AND USE OF THE CHANCEL AT READING

### STRUCTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

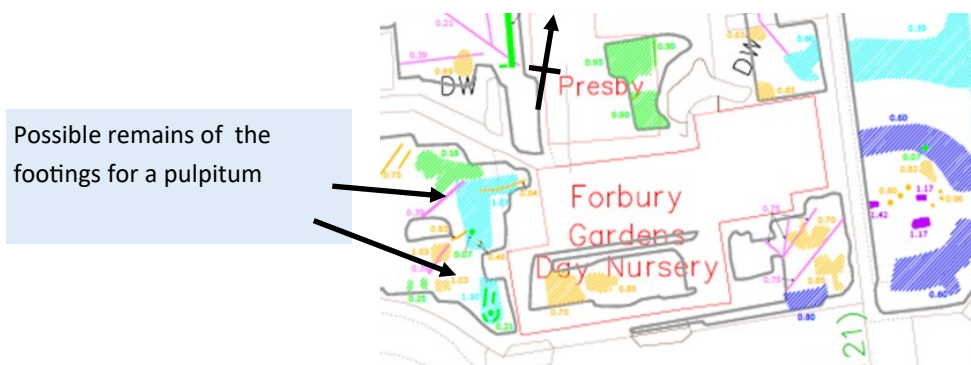
Before presenting the alternative possibilities regarding the design and use of various parts of the chancel at Reading, I should like to draw attention to the possible existence of a pulpitum in the Abbey church. This will help determine the design and positioning of the choir and possibly of the Abbot's chair. We shall see how this may also help narrow down the location of Henry I's tomb.

The GPR survey showed up the possibility of a pulpitum, but when I first saw the findings its very existence was pure speculation on my part. I based this upon what one might expect to find in a Romanesque monastic church. (For my discussion on this topic in 2016 shortly after the GPR results see [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1\\_COHBQ\\_oUX22boIn9JzXgq3SLrKyU\\_iv/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_COHBQ_oUX22boIn9JzXgq3SLrKyU_iv/view) page 8).

I have made frequent reference to Kemp's publication *Reading Abbey Records a new miscellany*. Among the treasures in this indispensable resource for any serious student of Reading Abbey, is a specific reference to a pulpitum. This occurs in one of the *Miracles of the Hand of St James*. It is number XVIII, which Kemp dates to between 1163 and 1187. During the account of this miracle Kemp's translation says that *the lord Gilbert, bishop of London, went up on to the screen and, as he transferred the hand of the most holy apostle from the old reliquary to the new one, he blessed the people with it*.

What is of interest is the word used in the original Latin for Kemp's English word 'screen'. In the Latin this is *pulpitum*. Here we have documentary evidence not just of a screen, but of a particular type of screen, namely a 'pulpitum'. I will describe the full importance of this later. For the moment I should like to point out that this type of screen is always situated at the entrance to the choir area, in fact one of its primary functions was to be the real and symbolic formal entry into the chancel, the most sacred part of the church.

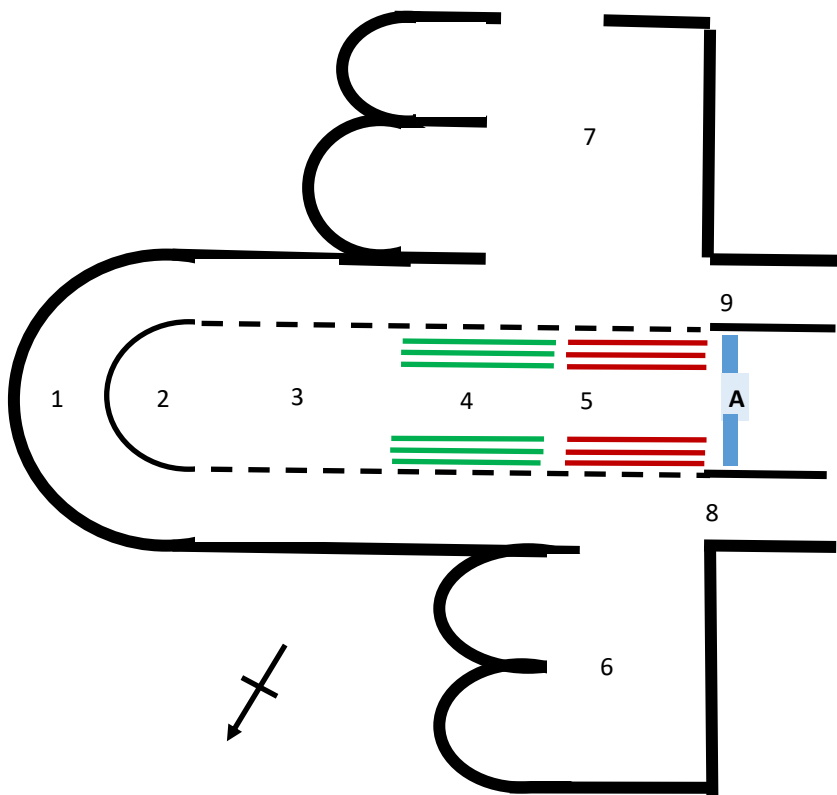
One further comment that I would like to make is that it is possible that the first pulpitum was made of wood and that the substantial stone screen indicated by the GPR, if indeed this is what the survey is showing, was erected at a later date. It is also possible that the first screen was not sited where the GPR possible footings indicate, but further west in the nave. As we have seen, it is unlikely to have been further east as the number of choir places required, if there were indeed 200 monks, would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to fit them all into the space available in the chancel.



## THE WEST END OF THE CHANCEL

We know, therefore, that some sort of screen, according to the *Abbey Records* a pulpitum, stood in the Abbey church by the late 1180s. As this structure was invariably placed at the entrance to the chancel we may reasonably assume that it was somewhere near to where the nave and crossing met, and this is exactly where the GPR survey shows what could be its footings.

Having also seen the length required to accommodate the number of monks within the chancel I am taking the liberty of assuming that the pulpitum, be it the original or maybe one built later, is that as shown on the GPR survey and therefore at the entrance to the crossing as shown with the letter A on the plan. I have also inserted choir stalls in areas 4 and 5.



As we have seen the choir was the area where the monks would have spent most of their time when in church. The *Opus Dei*, the work of God, was not just a devotional liturgical act, it was the culmination of the hours spent transcribing, learning and practising the chants. It was considered work, and indeed it would have been exhausting labour. For this reason the Cluniacs considered its observance complied both with St Benedict's injunction that his monks should engage in physical labour and with the aphorism 'to work is to pray', *laborare est orare*, which could be read as 'to pray is to work'. This derives from Benedict's twofold instruction that a monk's life should be one of 'prayer and work', *ora et labora*. The Cluniac emphasis on elaborate chant was questioned by some. The Cistercians, for instance, stressed the need for manual work, especially in the fields, alongside the duty of prayer in choir.

Be that as it may, in a Cluniac monastery, the chancel was at the centre of monastic life and the choir underpinned the liturgy in all its aspects. Just as the ceremonial was ornamented with highly decorated vestments and elaborate liturgy, so too the whole monastery would have been designed to reflect the topics of the chants based on the psalms, canticles and other scriptural readings. As at Cluny, the walls would have been painted with pictures retelling biblical stories and the pillar capitals may well have had sculptured figures representing the struggle between the forces of 'good' and 'evil', of the vices and virtues, as told in the 5th century allegory the *Psychomachia*, or *War of the Souls*. Whether these existed or not at Reading, it is certain that Cluniac monks would have been familiar with the images and the morality tales associated with them.



One source and inspiration for art and sculpture was the *Physiologus*. Of unknown authorship, this book was probably compiled in the 5th century, though earlier dates have been suggested, and may be based on ancient Romano-Greek anthropomorphic tales. Unlike some early natural histories, such as Pliny's *Natural History*, the *Physiologus* was never intended to be an accurate account of the animal kingdom. The work does use descriptions of animals found in such earlier works but its aim was very different. The characters are designed to convey a moral tale; they represent Christian religious dogma. They are allegorical figures telling of the virtues and vices which, it was believed, were embedded in nature. This was a metaphysical dimension where moral characteristics transcended the boundaries between the spiritual and physical world. Fantastical hybrid creatures might result, but the modern observer should always remember their allegorical and metaphorical intention. Nor is this just a modern interpretation. Origen, writing in the early 3rd century, argued that only someone in danger of 'losing their wits' would believe that 'God planted trees in the garden of Eden like a gardener'. He argued for a metaphorical, moral and spiritual interpretation of scripture.

Today the most readily visible, and well preserved, examples of these stories and figures are to be found on the misericords of choir seats all over Europe. Whereas many stone sculptures are difficult to see or decipher as they are either high in the vaults, on top of pillars or badly weathered from being outdoors, these wooden carved sculptures present us with images of fascinating immediacy and intimacy.

The picture, alongside, shows one such seat from Gloucester cathedral. Like many extant misericords it dates to the 14th century. The photograph shows the small ledge on which the monk could rest whilst still standing, the misericord. Under this are carved figures, described on the Cathedral's website as 'monsters'.



Gloucester cathedral— misericord

The one on the left has human hands and a man's face with large protruding ears, under a conical cap, but with three clawed feet. The one on the right has a woman's hooded face and four three-clawed feet. Both have lion's tails and appear to have feathered wings. The conical hat was that which, by the 13th century, Jews were obliged to wear to distinguish themselves from Christians. The large ears may denote a monkey. Each of these features is symbolic of some connection with the supposed attributes of the figures portrayed, mythical or real.

There are hundreds such carvings in England, let alone throughout Europe, and this is not the place to make a study of them. However the design of the choir stalls is an important part in reconstructing an image of the chancel of Reading Abbey. The stalls themselves would have become more elaborate from the 13th to 15th centuries. They may also have been placed in an elaborate wooden carved setting covering the bare stonework of the building, as shown over page in the picture of the choir of Winchester.

Another feature of the Chancel would have been the colourful floor tiling. However it is unlikely that the remnants we have in our current collections date from the time of the Abbey's foundation. There may have been a tiliary at Tilehurst in the 12th century. Excavations in Silver Street have confirmed the existence of at least one late 12th century tiliary in this area. According to Slade the Abbey tiles date to the 13th century and later.

There are two types of tile found at Reading. The earlier used an inlay technique. This involved pressing a wooden stamp embossed with the design into the hardened dark clay, filling this with lighter white clay and scraping away the excess, before firing and glazing. A later technique was to cover the whole of the dark hardened clay with the light soft clay, then pressing this into the dark clay with the stamp. As this is nearer to the concept of printing they are often referred to as printed tiles.



Inlaid patterned tile from Reading Abbey



Printed tile from Reading, showing the three scallop shells of the Abbey crest



A miscellany of floor tiles at Winchester



St James' church — pre 1926 photograph of some patterned floor tiles, probably from Reading Abbey. These were placed next to the *Reading Abbey Stone* which had been discovered in 1835, carefully buried in the chancel of the Abbey church.



The resultant tiles are quite different both in appearance and durability. The inlaid tiles have an impression of more than 1/8th of an inch and the pattern lines are clear and sharp, whereas in the case of the printed tiles it is rarely more than 1/16th of an inch deep and the patterns are noticeable less clear cut. Both types were glazed, often with a lead, to help resist wear.

There is also a difference in size. The inlaid tiles are normally 6 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. square. with some smaller at half this, 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. square; the printed tiles are normally 4 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. square; very few are 6 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. square. The inlaid tiles are usually about 1 in. thick, whereas the printed tiles are about <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. One clever and interesting feature, found especially in the smaller inlaid tiles, is that the edges are bevelled inwards from the top so that the retaining sub mortar can spread between the tiles to grip them but not rise over the surface. Another characteristic is that the earlier inlaid tiles have keying marks; the printed tiles lack these. Keying is more necessary for wall tiles to prevent slippage during application. Could it be that the tiles had a dual use, floor and wall, or is it that the tile makers were just following a tradition?

This view in Winchester Cathedral, taken from the presbytery, and looking west down the choir, gives an indication of what Reading may have looked like, certainly by the middle of the 14th century. The presbytery, in the foreground, was an open, and sometimes raised, area where, as we have seen, the rich liturgical ceremonies between the high altar and the choir would have taken place.

We can see the modern tiled flooring and beyond. At the very west end of the choir the screen leads to the nave of the church. It is possible to make out some seats backing onto the screen. Those who occupied these faced east and had a clear view of the whole chancel, from the back of the choir right through to the altar. A similar arrangement can be seen in the choir of St George's chapel, Windsor.

The tomb is probably that of Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester. However, it is thought that it is the original site of the tomb of William II (Rufus), whose bones were subsequently moved.

An obvious question is whether this has any bearing, or influence, on where the tomb of his brother, Henry I, was placed within the chancel of Reading Abbey.



Winchester Cathedral choir



### PART 3 - THE *READING ABBEY RECORDS* AND THE POSITION OF THE ABBOT'S CHOIR STALL AND OF THE TOMB OF HENRY I

With the publication of the *Reading Abbey Records* in 2018 it became clear that there was a close connection between the location of the tomb and that of the Abbot's seat in the choir, or maybe one of his places in the chancel. In Part 3 I shall look at what this information adds to our understanding of the chancel.

The document concerning the ceremonial surrounding the annual commemoration of Henry's death on the 1st December 1135, is to be found in a small gathering of additional folios bound in at the end of a 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of the *Summa de Dictamine* or *Summa Dictaminis* by Guido Fava. Originally from Westminster Abbey, it is now in the British Library — (Additional Ms 8167, fo. 200r-v). The ceremonial covers both the day itself and the day before, or vigil. That it was a solemn commemoration, liturgically speaking, is demonstrated by the fact that the *Office for the Dead* was sung with full ceremony. It was, however, also a time of celebration with extra food and distribution of charity. Indeed thirteen poor people from the town were fed in the monastery's *aula*, hall.

Another manuscript that contains the third set of the Annals of Reading Abbey, and reproduced in the *Reading Abbey Records*, has a list of feast days and anniversaries observed annually at Reading. This enumerates these special days and how they were to be celebrated, according to their liturgical category. The most lavish, such as Christmas, were known as 'doubles'. Henry's feast day is ranked among these.

These two documents provide us with invaluable information. They tell us not only that the liturgy was to be performed in the most solemn way, but we read that the church was to be lavishly decorated, that the services were to be accompanied by clergy in what we have to assume to be the best copes, bells were to be rung both inside and outside the church, and generous portions of special food were to be provided to both the monks and the poor of the town.

The manuscript concerning the ceremonial around Henry's commemoration, is not a full rubric or liturgical text, but rather it consists of specific instructions which read more as clarifications to the full ritual. At times it is written in what best can be described as 'note form'. It comprises instructions for the performance of the liturgy for both the Mass and Office. Unfortunately it has suffered from some damage where a hole makes the meaning of the text uncertain on both sides of the folio; more about this later

In describing, in some detail, the actions and dress of the clergy, the manuscript also gives what we might call 'stage directions'. As such we read about the roles of certain participants, their number and where they should stand or sit. Consequently we also get something of a description of the chancel and how it was used.

I have written a more complete analysis of the text of *Reading Abbey Records a new miscellany* elsewhere. Here I am going to restrict myself to those sections that make direct reference to aspects of the chancel and how it was used. Using this information I shall add to it relevant information which I have

described earlier and from what we know more generally about Benedictine monasteries and specifically their chancels. And so I hope to give a yet clearer understanding of what the chancel at Reading Abbey may have looked like and how it was used.

I shall use sub headings to draw attention to the features, such as the altar and choir, being described in various parts of the *Abbey Records* and comment on what we can learn from them.

The excerpts are in the order in which they appear in the *Abbey Records* manuscript.

## THE CHOIR

In order to give some idea of the space required for the ceremonials described in the manuscript, I am starting with the section which describes the entry to the chancel for the singing of Matins. The English translation is that made by Kemp in the *Reading Abbey Records a new miscellany*.

*At the invitatory, which is 'Circumdederunt', four brethren in (copes) are designated. At the third responsary four brethren (are designated), at the sixth—five at the ninth—six at the ninth.*

The invitatory, or opening prayer, which in this case is Psalm 17, is sung at Matins. This is the longest and most complicated of the Offices and is normally divided into three parts, or nocturns. Just occasionally, in Benedictine monasteries, there were four nocturns. We read that, at Reading, by the beginning of the last nocturn, six monks in copes entered the chancel. Their role was to lead the singing of the psalms. These six monks in heavily embroidered copes, no doubt accompanied by their acolytes, two apiece, would have occupied a great deal of space in the chancel. This is but one example of the elaborate ceremonial in Benedictine, especially Cluniac, monasteries and is the reason why the presbytery had to be so spacious.

## THE ALTAR AND THE TOMB

We then read the following,

*After Vespers with all bells ringing inside and outside, and the lord Abbot with cope having entered the choir, the hebdomadary shall begin the antiphon 'Placebo'. The lord Abbot, after the antiphon at 'Magnificat' has begun, will cense the High Altar and the king's tomb with two in copes assigned for this, who at the end of the third psalm will enter the choir with censers, and after the censuring of the altar and tomb shall proceed to cense the lord abbot*

This refers to the beginning of singing the Vespers of *Office for the Dead*; the *placebo*, Psalm 114, being the first psalm of this Office. We have seen the role of the hebdomadary. He would most probably have sung this from the great lectern in the centre of the choir. The censuring of the altar and tomb was an elaborate affair. The Abbot would have been accompanied not just by histhurifers (thurible bearers) but with someone carrying the incense boat and most probably at least two other clerics, one most certainly being the Precentor. I am speculating that the reference to 'two in copes' means that the Abbot would have been flanked by two other monks in richly embroidered vestments. The Precentor directed the whole liturgy. His authority during services exceeded even that of the Abbot.

I have no doubt that the procession would also have consisted of at least two acolytes. In other words we need to imagine a procession consisting of the Abbot, two assistant clerics in copes, thurifers, an acolyte carrying the incense boat, and two candle-bearing acolytes. It is most likely that there would also have been a cross bearer who would have led the procession. This adds up to at least eight people who had to manoeuvre around the altar area and then the tomb. It was normal liturgical practice, as it is today, that once the celebrant had finished censuring the 'holy objects', such as the Bible, the altar or a tomb, he would hand the thurible to another cleric who then censed him. It would also be usual after this that all those present would also be censed. This is not stated in the manuscript. We must remember, however, that these are additional instructions, or clarifications, and do not represent the whole ceremony. Consequently, we can be certain that a great deal of space was required for such an elaborate ceremony. It is necessary to consider this when assessing where Henry's tomb may have stood in relation to the altar.

As a side note I should like to draw attention to the use of the words *maius altare*. All too often we read the translation 'high altar' for the word *altare*. In these cases it may indeed mean the high altar, but it is interesting that here the writer is being very specific. The Latin word *maius* means 'greater'; being the comparative neuter form of *magnus* (great). So here we encounter the possibility that there were at least two altars; the 'greater' or 'high' altar and one, or more, lesser altars. This is not unexpected. The high altar was reserved for solemn Masses whereas lower down in the chancel there was often a simpler altar, the matutinal, for the early morning matutinal, or 'morrow' Mass. We know that at Cluny there were several altars, used for the 'morrow' Masses, behind the High Altar. This allowed several monks to say morning Masses. Could this also have been the case at Reading?

## THE TOMB

The next directive that mentions the tomb comes after the comments on procedure following the Hour of Sext. This is the liturgical hour of the Office at midday, or the 'sixth hour', and normally preceded the main Mass of the day for the whole monastic community.

*And immediately after Sext a peal of bells is rung until the abbot and the whole convent are revested. And after the peal of bells the abbot is to proceed to his seat by the tomb upon the pavement to the south side, associated with the prior (if...) or another prelate should not be present. And then after the precentor has started the responsary 'Subvenite', the commendation of the soul will be fully carried out with the customary antiphons, psalms and collects, with the convent revested. Nine rule the choir, the responsory is sung by four, the tract by six.*

This is one of the key passages which may help us determine the location of the Abbot's seat and that of the tomb. Unfortunately it also happens just at the point where there is a hole in the manuscript. This is such an important extract that it is worth quoting the Latin. The relevant text reads *ingrediatur abbas ad sedile suum iuxta tumbam super pavementum ex parte australi*, ("the abbot is to proceed to his seat by the tomb upon the pavement to the south side"). This makes it clear that there was a close connection between the location of the tomb and that of the Abbot's seat. We shall see, however, that there is some question as to whether this seat refers to one in the choir or whether there was another elsewhere in the chancel. The text categorically states that

his seat is 'by the tomb'. The Latin word used is *iuxta* which means 'next to' or 'alongside'. Another important word, the significance of which I highlight elsewhere, is that we learn that the tomb is upon the pavement', *super pavementum*. This presents us with the possibility that this refers to the area beyond the choir. However it may also merely be a reference to the open space of the chancel. It is not possible to come to a definitive answer. This passage both aids us in assessing the appearances of the chancel but also raises some serious problems which I shall address later.

## THE TOMB AND THE ALTAR

The tomb and the altar are mentioned in one sentence when describing the Offertory chant during the main Mass of the day.

*All are to do the offertory chant, the verse of the offertory 'Redemptor' shall be sung by four between the tomb and the altar.*

Four cantors with their attendants require, as shown above, quite a bit of space. I would suggest that although this action may have taken place at the top of the altar steps, it is much more likely to have been in the more spacious presbytery area. As the text states, these cantors are positioned between the altar and the tomb. That they would have required considerable space, would suggest that the tomb was some distance to the west of the altar.

## A QUESTION OF THE METHOD OF THE BURIAL OF HENRY I

There is no specific description in the *Abbey Records* of the burial or the method of burial. In Part 4 I will be looking in more detail at some theories regarding the tomb's location. However, before this I would like to note some comments that have been made about the possible method of Henry's burial.

The following sums up the alternatives.

PROPOSAL ONE: Henry was interred in front of, and possibly very near to, the high altar, then his remains were moved and 're-buried'.

In this case the alternatives are;

1. He was 're-buried' above ground, inside the tomb chest as in the case of King John at Worcester
2. He was re-interred and the tomb chest with image were placed over this new grave.

PROPOSAL TWO: Henry was interred in front of, and possibly very near to, the high altar. He was left in this original burial place and the tomb chest and image were erected elsewhere in the chancel.

PROPOSAL THREE: Henry was initially 'buried' in the position of the final tomb chest which was added later.

In this case the alternatives are;

1. He was 'buried' in a sarcophagus which was placed on the pavement and the chest and image were added later
2. He was initially interred, and the chest and image were added later

There are therefore three proposals regarding the method of burial all of which impact on the nature of the tomb, wherever it may have been.

## COMMENT

The second proposal suggests that by the time the tomb monument had been completed, the decision was taken not to move the king's body, so that his monument reflected his burial but, unlike King John's, did not physically contain it. The proponents of this scheme claim that this theory attempts to incorporate the GPR survey results, which show possible graves near the likely location of the high altar and that the GPR indicates that two, possibly three, stone coffin burial sites located in the area of the apse, now within the location of the car park of the former prison.

My opinion is that, as we have seen above (pages 5 –6), it is not possible to locate exactly the altar's position. There is, therefore, no way of knowing how these possible graves stood in relationship to the High Altar.

As Henry's death was unexpected, it seems unlikely that there was a tomb chest and image ready to be installed at Reading. He died suddenly and his body was brought to Reading in a state of decomposition. It is not likely that the sarcophagus, assuming its use, was one that had been especially prepared for the king.

The possibility that Henry's body was placed above ground, once the tomb chest was installed, is lessened by the report of 1398 which states that he was 'buried'. The Latin word used is *humati*. This derives from *humare* which means covered with earth, placed in the earth, that is interred. This indicates that by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century it was believed that Henry was below ground. It is of course possible that the word was being used in a wider sense, but weight needs to be given to the usual meaning of the verb chosen by the writer. The following is the report of 1398 from the *Reading Abbey Cartularies* where we find this description, followed by my translation.

1398 Richard II - Confirmation of the Abbey's Liberties - Reading Abbey Cartularies 1, 116. (ed. Kemp)

*Tumbam et imaginem Henrici quondam regis Anglie ... et fundatoris abbacie predicte (Reading) in eadem humati ... honeste facerunt reparari.*

"They (the monks) must ensure that the tomb and effigy of Henry, sometime king of England, ... and founder of the aforesaid monastery and who was buried in that same place ... are properly repaired".

In my view it is most unlikely that Henry was initially interred in front of the High Altar and subsequently left in this position, whilst a tomb chest with image was erected elsewhere in the chancel; that is further west in the presbytery or even in the choir.

This is the most problematic of all the theories. There are too many alternatives and variations within the proposal. One moves from an unproven assumption, namely that the altar was at the far eastern wall, to assuming that the potential GPR burial sites are positioned directly in front of the High Altar. Moreover the Stratascan analysts did not say that these are definitely tombs, only that they give the indications of being tombs. If, however, they are burials it is just as likely, some would say more than likely, that these would have been behind the high altar. In this case the altar would be further west, although probably still within the cord of the apse.

In addition to this, the documentary evidence of the liturgical instructions in the *Abby Records* makes it very clear that the monks in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century clearly believed that Henry was buried in the *tumbam* (tomb). They would not have countenanced concentrating the liturgy on the tomb-chest had they believed that Henry was not buried in the tomb, such as near the Altar. The instructions make several references to censing the tomb, having candles burning for the two days of the commemoration around the tomb and stating that the Abbots seat was next to the tomb. These were theologically charged ceremonies linked with the belief in their effectiveness in assuring the salvation of the soul of Henry. It would be very wrong to view these acts as symbolic theatre. I also think it is highly unlikely, that only just over 100 years following Henry's burial, the monastic community would somehow have lost track of the burial site of their founder. The Abbey was built as his mausoleum. As the 'Foundation Charter' says, Reading Abbey was built for the salvation of Henry's soul and his place of burial was at the very centre of its existence and purpose.

Another point to consider is that we read that there was at least one 'morrow' or 'matitudinal' Mass. If we are making architectural comparisons with regards the positioning of altars, it is possible, indeed likely, that there was space behind the High Altar for the matitudinal altar. At Cluny there were at least three such altars to the east of the High Altar, between it and along the rear wall of the sanctuary. The exact positioning of the high altar is impossible to verify. We have seen (page 5) that it most probably would have been placed on a cord of the semi circle, within the radius of the apse. The comparative architectural evidence, therefore, leaves room for significant variations in the location of the altar. These range from the far eastern end of the chancel, within the apse and close to the rear wall, to as far west as the radius of the cord of the apse semi-circle 6.75m (22ft), and potentially even further west than this, a distance of some 10m (over 32ft)

It is unlikely that Richard II would have been so insistent on the repair of the tomb and its effigy, if Henry's remains were elsewhere. We also have the 16<sup>th</sup> century evidence that the tomb was in the 'midst of the high quire'. Had there been any tradition, or even more likely a burial stone set into the pavement, stating that Henry's remains were not on the same site as the tomb chest, it is unlikely that this would not have been noted in such strong terms.

In brief the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century liturgical directive clearly indicates the belief that Henry's body was at the site of the tomb chest and this is supported by two other pieces of documentary evidence.

\*Approximate measurements

## PART 4 - THEORIES CONCERNING THE LOCATION OF HENRY I's TOMB

In Part 4 I shall use the above information to examine whether it is possible to identify the site of Henry's tomb.

### THEORY 1

#### **Abbot's choir stall and tomb at the west end of the choir.**

In this theory the Abbot's choir stall was immediately to the south on entering the choir from the nave, presumably through the pulpitum.

This description presents us with both an apparent solution and a problem at the same time.

There is evidence that an abbot's seat was usually positioned immediately on entering the choir area of the chancel, normally through the pulpitum or a screen of some sort. We read in the *Abbey Records* that at Reading the abbot's seat was on the south of the choir. By the 12th century this was the normal side for the presiding cleric's seat or 'throne'. The use of the term throne does not imply that the abbot had the status of a bishop, merely that he presided over the ceremonies. There is a deal of research and commentary about whether the president's seat was on the north or south side, on the Gospel or Epistle side, of the church, and how this came to pass. But for our purposes, as we have an authoritative account for its position at Reading, we need not pursue this further. It is worth mentioning that it is thanks to Kemp's work on the *Abbey Records*, that this area of possible contention has been resolved. If this was the location of the Abbot's *sedile*, (seat), then Henry's tomb would have been alongside, or next to, (*iuxta*) his seat near the entrance to the choir, as shown on the plan. However there is some question concerning the meaning of the word *sedile*. I shall look at this when examining Theory 4.

As seen above, the abbot's seat in choir, or *stallus*, as the *Records* describe it, may have been part of the row with its back to the screen wall at right angles to the choir benches, known as a 'return stall'. In this case the Abbot would have had a commanding position, looking along the rest of the choir with a clear view to the altar. He would also have occupied the traditional orientation of facing east during Mass, even when he was not the presiding priest.

However we encounter two problems. First of all the *Abbey Records* describe how the Abbot took an active role in the ceremonial that accompanied the singing of the office. He is described, for example, as exiting the choir to change into a cope and on re-entering he returns to his seat whilst the tomb is censed.

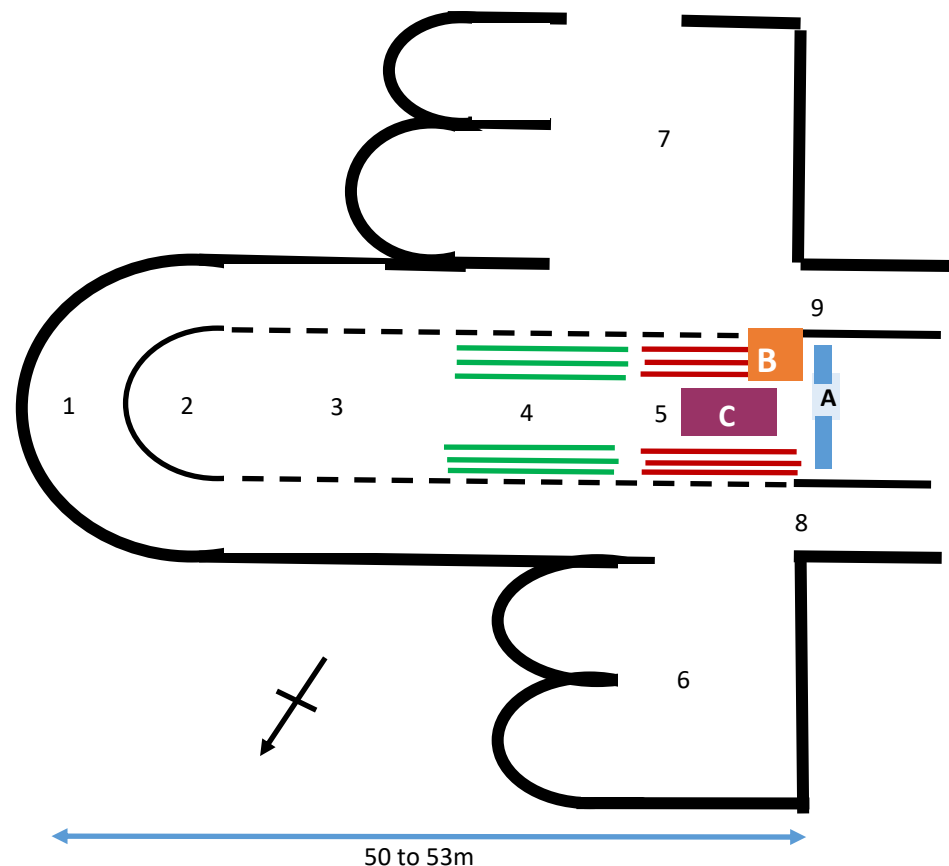
Does the siting of the tomb in this position allow for such elaborate ritual demanding quite a deal of space? It should be recalled that the monk censing the tomb would most probably have been accompanied by several others as he encircled it. There would also have been a substantial lectern in the middle of the choir. Would this extra obstacle have made it impossible, or at least difficult, to execute the elaborate ceremonials surrounding the tomb? The answer to both these questions is probably 'no'. The aisle was over 13 metres wide. Allowing for the stalls taking up about 6.7 metres, as at Lincoln, this would



leave over 8 metres around the tomb. The tomb itself would have taken up about one metre width, leaving 7 metres around the tomb, or over 3 metres each side between the tomb and the front row of the stalls. In addition it is possible that the front row may have been removed at this point, or that there was a gap in the rows of stalls allowing more space around the tomb. We know that the central gap in the choir stalls, apart from allowing access to the back row, also served to give space around the great lectern which would have stood in the centre of the choir.

Another problem stems from the text itself. This reads *Ingrediatur abbas ad sedile suum iuxta tumbam super pavimentum*. In other words the Abbot's seat, we read, was not just next to the tomb, but this latter was 'on the pavement'. It is possible that the author may have just been referring to the whole area of the chancel as the 'pavement'. On the other hand we would normally associate the use of the word 'pavement' with the area of the presbytery, which may have been raised above the level of the choir. It was not unknown for a bishop's or abbot's place in choir to be near the altar. This was normally the case in the early days of Christianity but was not so common in the later Middle Ages. I shall look at this when commenting on the 4th theory.

1. Ambulatory
  2. High Altar
  3. Presbytery
  4. Choir, east end —(Stalls in green)
  5. Choir, west end - (Stalls in red)
  6. North Transept
  7. South Transept
  8. North aisle
  9. South aisle
- A. Pulpitum: The GPR survey showed up a feature which is consistent with a pulpitum. The existence of a pulpitum is shown in Miracle XVIII.
- B. Abbot's choir stall: This was on the south side of the choir. The most usual place for the Abbot's seat was immediately to the right on entering the choir through the pulpitum.
- C. Possible location of Henry's tomb.

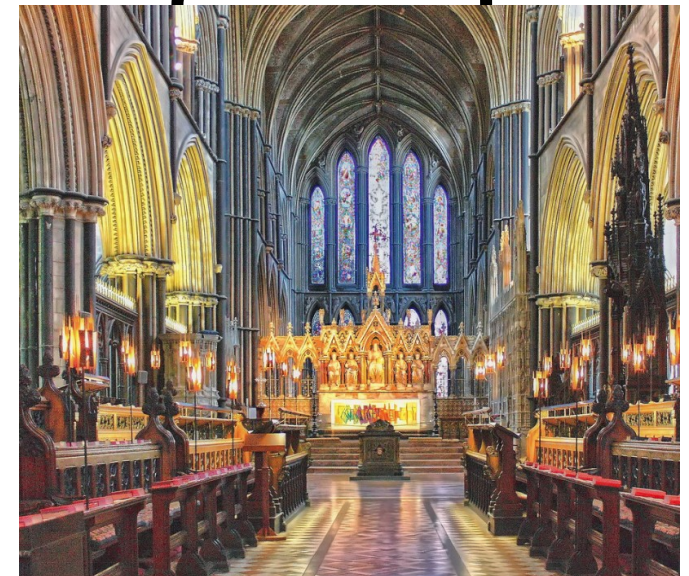
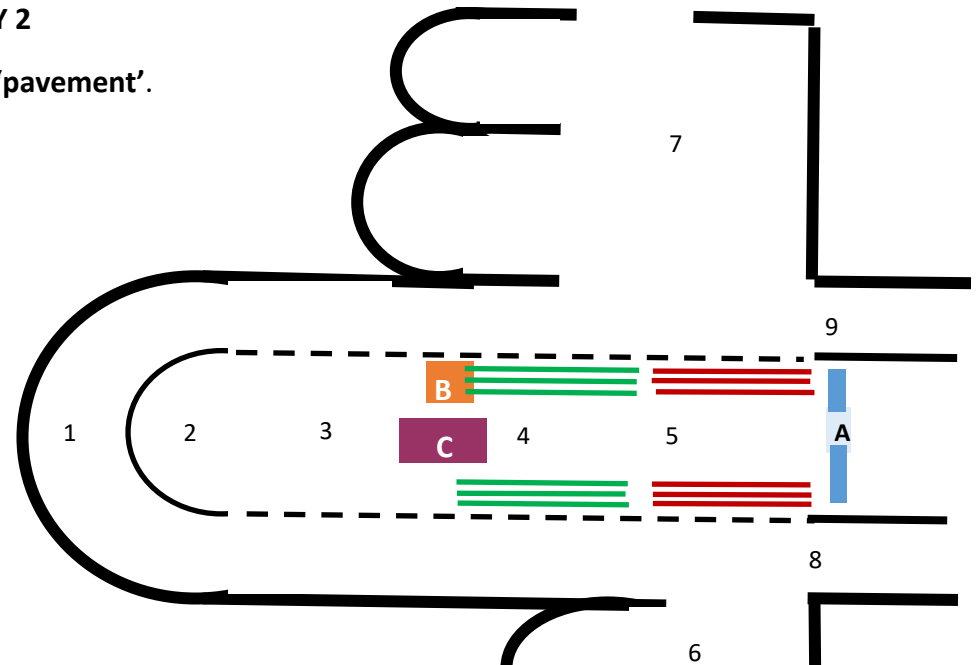


## LOCATION OF HENRY I's TOMB

### THEORY 2

Abbot's choir stall and tomb at the east end of the choir, near the presbytery 'pavement'.

1. Ambulatory
  2. High Altar
  3. Presbytery
  4. Choir, east end —(Stalls in green)
  5. Choir, west end - (Stalls in red)
  6. North Transept
  7. South Transept
  8. North aisle
  9. South aisle
- A. Pulpitum: The GPR survey showed up a feature which is consistent with a pulpitum. The existence of a pulpitum is shown in Miracle XVIII.
- B. Abbot's choir stall: This was on the south side of the choir. It is possible that the Abbot had a 'presidents chair' at the east end of the choir
- C. If the Abbot's seat was at the east end of the choir then Henry's tomb would have been located as shown.



Tomb of King John, at the east end of the choir in Worcester Cathedral.

If this theory is correct then Henry's tomb would have been approximately in the same position in the chancel at Reading as that of King William II (Rufus) at Winchester or King John at Worcester.

In this scenario we overcome the problem of the space required for the ceremonial described in several customs as well as in the *Abbey Records*. It would also allow for the Abbot's place in choir to be described as *super pavement*.

## LOCATION OF HENRY I's TOMB

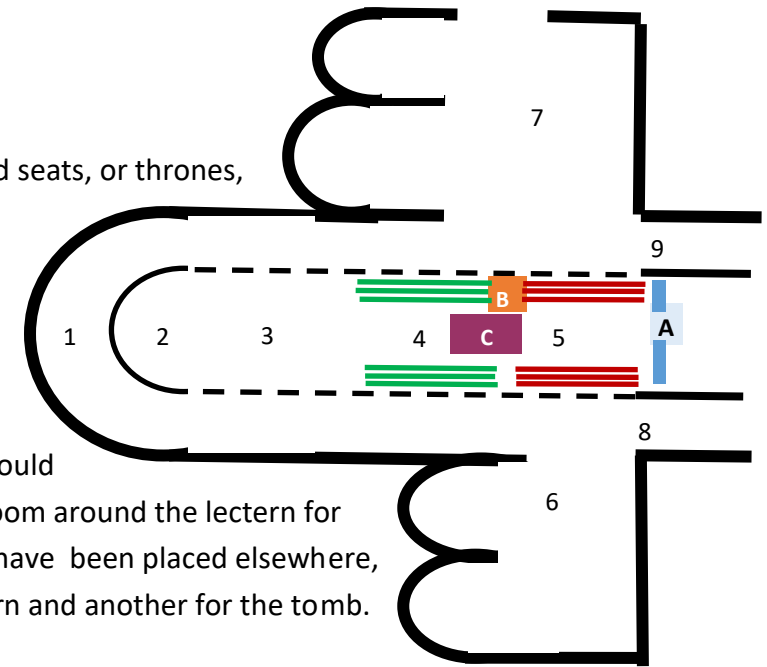
### THEORY 3

#### The abbot's choir seat in the centre of the choir

That this may have occurred sometimes is as indicated by the existence of elaborate main canopied seats, or thrones, in this position in some churches.

Apart from this location being rare, one major problem is that it would make the ceremonial requirements very difficult to fulfil. Another problem is that at Reading we learn that the tomb was next to the Abbot's seat. If this was at this central position, then the tomb would have had to be aligned with the gap in the stalls. Could this be described as being 'next' to the Abbot's seat?

Is this a reasonable place for it to be sited? It also raises the problem of where the great lectern would have stood. The space between the stalls, apart from allowing access to the back rows, also gave room around the lectern for the ceremonial associated with the readings. Nevertheless it is a possibility. The great lectern may have been placed elsewhere, such as in the presbytery, or there may have been two breaks in the row of stalls, one for the lectern and another for the tomb.



## LOCATION OF HENRY I's TOMB

### THEORY 4

#### The *sedile* was near the High Altar

This theory would presuppose that the reference to the Abbot's *sedile* in the *Abbey Records* is alluding to his place as the officiating priest at Mass. The word *sedile* is in the singular and can mean seat, bench or even stool. Today it is more usual to find it in its plural form *sedilia*, when referring to the three seats reserved for the celebrant priest, deacon and sub deacon at Mass. These are situated to the south of the altar. An example of this may be seen in the photograph of the *sedilia* at Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire. Generally speaking, however, this arrangement appeared in churches, as permanent recessed stone structures, later than the time of the manuscript. Moreover we are using late 18th century terminology, so care needs to be taken in the interpretation of the words *sedile* or *sedilia*.

This is, therefore, possibly the most difficult of the references to analyse. We have seen that the word used for the Abbot's seat, in this context, is *sedile*. As time progressed *sedilia* were incorporated into the masonry



on the south, or epistle, side of the altar. It is also known that there were moveable wooden *sedilia*. If this was the case at Reading, it is conceivable that the reference to the Abbot's *sedile* was to such an arrangement and that it was placed next to the tomb, probably below the altar steps and in the presbytery. This would at least allow for the tomb being in the presbytery, as stated in the Lambeth Palace document. (See page 27 no 2).

There are several considerations associated with this theory, some of which appear to be contradictory.

The first is that it would place Henry's tomb, if alongside the *sedile*, almost certainly near the steps to the altar and so at the far eastern end of the presbytery. However in Benolt's *Visitation* we read that the tomb was in the middle of the choir, which would be at its western end. (See page 28 no. 5).

One other factor is that this key passage in the manuscript is just where there is a hole in the document. It is worth looking at what is written in detail and how Kemp approaches the problem of the missing words.

*ingrediatur abbas ad sedile suum iuxta tumbam super pavimentum ex parte australi, associato sibi priore (si...) [missing section owing to a hole in the ms.] vel alius prelati non interfuerit..*

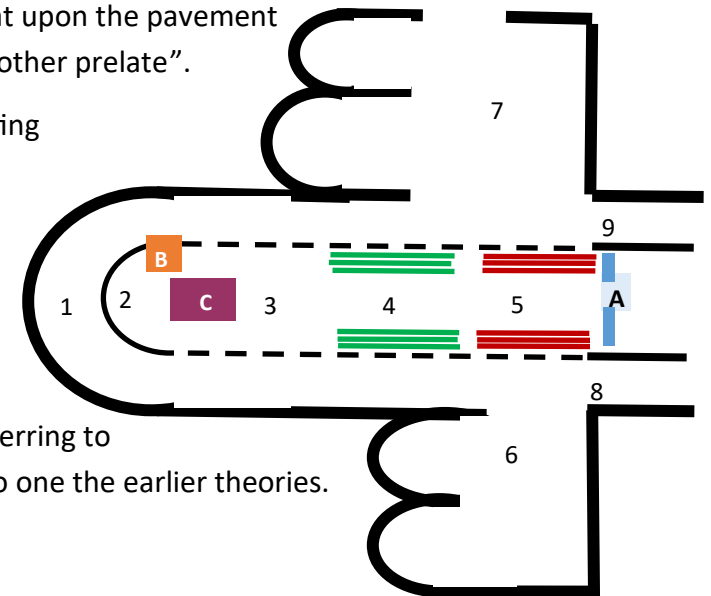
"the abbot is to proceed to his seat by the tomb upon the pavement to the south side, associated with the prior (if...) [missing section owing to a hole in the ms.] or another prelate should not be present".

I think that the key words we should focus on here are *associato sibi priore* ("associated with the prior..."). It is conceivable that although the word *sedile* is in the singular and does not therefore appear to be referring to a *sedilia*, it is possible in fact we are looking at the description of seats for the presiding priest, in this case the Abbot, a deacon, namely the prior who is accompanying him, and another cleric, acting as sub deacon. Rather speculatively therefore the passage may have read "the Abbot is to proceed to his seat upon the pavement to the south side, where the prior and sub prior will be seated or, should the latter not be present, another prelate".

This is indeed very hypothetical, but the only way I can see that this passage makes sense is if it is stating that the Abbot's seat was in this location.

The diagram illustrates the most likely place for the *sedile* in this theory. However, if the *sedile* was a movable item of furniture and placed next to the tomb, this would be a most unusual place for the presiding priest's chair, which should be next to the altar on the sanctuary, with room for two other clerics.

Finally, if the word *sedile*, in this context, has its literal meaning of a 'seat', then it could merely be referring to the Abbot's seat in the chancel. This would have been his place of honour in the choir. So we return to one of the earlier theories.



## PART 5 - OTHER DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE FOR THE SITING OF HENRY'S TOMB

In this section I will look at other historical documentary references to Henry's tomb. I shall examine if, and how, these may be able to help in identifying the link between the tomb and the Abbot's chair or the Altar, as seen in Parts 3 and 4.

Apart from those in the *Abbey Records* there are only a few references to Henry's tomb. However these do give us clues as to its location.

In chronological order they are:

1. Late 12th, very early 13th century. Gervase of Canterbury (d. circa 1210) - *Opera historica* Rolls series Vol I, page 95 (Quoted in Hurry p 6).

*ante altare sepultum est.* ('He is buried in front of the altar') This is often translated as 'the high altar'.

For discussion of the term 'high altar', see page 18 and 'comment 2' below

2. 13th century. Lambeth Palace Library ms 371

The tomb is *in medio presbiteri ante altare.* ("In the centre of the presbytery in front of the altar")

Here we have a categorical reference to Henry's tomb being in the centre of the presbytery. As I have commented above, when we read such descriptions, it is necessary to question whether the writer is using terms in the strictly architectural sense that we may apply today. Nevertheless, taken together with other sources, such descriptions do help build an overall picture.

The reference occurs in an account of how and where Henry's second wife, Adeliza, came to be buried in Reading Abbey. Following Henry's death Adeliza married William d'Albini, Earl of Lincoln and Earl of Arundel. It is worth quoting the account in full, in translation.

*William earl of Lincoln married Queen Adeliza, wife of the founder as is evident in a charter and confirmation of the same William. Accordingly the king's council would not permit her to lie with him (Henry) in the middle of the presbytery before the altar. She lies buried, however, on the north side of the choir between the columns, apart from King Henry I, our founder and her husband, on whose souls may God have mercy. Amen*

3. 13th century Death and Burial of William of Poitiers. Two chronicles reference this event.

A. *Flores historiarum* - Roger of Wendover, with additions by Matthew Paris .

This concerns the death and burial of William of Poitiers, son of Henry II (grandson of Henry I).

*AD 1156 Willelmus quoque primogenitus regis Henrici obiit, et sepultus est apud Radingum*

“... also William, firstborn son of King Henry, died and was buried at Reading”

B. *Annales de Waverleia* (II p237)

For the year 1135 it states ;

*Anno tertio Henrici secundi regis, obiit Willelmus peror. primogenitus filius Henrici regis, et sepultus est Radingis as pedes Henrici regis proavi sui.*

“In the third year (of the reign) of King Henry II, William of Poitiers, first son of King Henry, died and was buried at Reading at the feet of his grandfather, King Henry (the First)”

4. 1398 Richard II - Confirmation of the Abbey's Liberties - Cartularies 1, 116. (ed. Kemp)

*Tumbam et imaginem Henrici quondam regis Anglie ... et fundatoris abbacie predictae (Reading) in eadem humati ... honeste facerunt reparari.*

“They (the monks) must ensure that the tomb and effigy of Henry, sometime king of England, ... founder of the aforesaid monastery who is buried in that same place ... are properly repaired”.

5. 1532 Thomas Benolt Clerenceux (King of Arms)

In 1532 Thomas Benolt made an heraldic visitation where he reported that Henry's tomb was

*in the myddest of the high Quyer* (Kemp *Abbey Records* p 102 quoting 'Visitations of Berkshire' ed W H Rylands)

The full record reads

**King Henry the first iij<sup>d</sup> Sonne to w<sup>m</sup> Conquerour and first founder  
of the Abbaye of Redding ys buried in the myddest of the high  
Quyer w<sup>th</sup>in the sayde place afore rehercyd  
On the right hand of him liethe buried Ranawd Le fitz parys  
Before our Lady Chappell lyeth buried Thomas Wood Knight some-  
tyme Justice of the Comune place  
In the bodye of the Church in our Ladye Chappell lyeth buried  
Thomas Prowt**

Clarenceux, King of Arms, is the senior of the two provincial kings of arms and has jurisdiction south of the River Trent. The office almost certainly existed in 1420, and there is a fair degree of probability that there was a *Claroncell rex heraldus armorum* in 1334. The title of Clarenceux is supposedly derived from either the Honour (or estates of dominion) of the Clare family or from the Dukedom of Clarence (Source Wikipedia)

## COMMENTS

These extracts confirm the following

1. Henry was buried in the chancel of the Abbey
2. His tomb was 'in front of the altar', which is assumed to be the high altar. However the word used is *altare*. There is specific reference to a 'high' altar in the *Abbey Records* when the word *maius* or 'greater' is used. Etymologically the word 'altar' has its origin in two Latin words *alta* and *ara*, that is 'high' and 'altar'. Nevertheless the word 'altar' was used in the middle ages, as now, for any altar—'high' or otherwise. The reference to a *maius altare* introduces another element into the debate. I explained above that it was not unknown for large monasteries to have two altars in the chancel. One was the High Altar for the main Mass of the day whereas there was also a lesser altar, the Matutinal Altar, further west, nearer the choir. I also pointed out that at Cluny there were altars behind, that is to the east of, the high altar. This is a feature that requires more examination and one which I intend to research. There were of course many altars around the Abbey church, such as those in the apsidal chapels, in the Lady Chapel and doubtless many others along the aisles.
3. The exact location of the tomb is mentioned twice. In one case we read it was in the 'presbytery' and in another that it was in the middle of the 'high choir'. This presents us with another clue, but one that also raises as many questions as solutions.

The term 'high quire' is ambivalent. The 'superior' or 'high' choir had been used in the early Christian church to refer to a choir behind the high altar. This was clearly not the case at Reading in 1532. It is possible that Benolt was making a distinction between the main choir, in the chancel, and any other choir in the Abbey church. It is likely, for instance, that there would have been a choir in the Lady Chapel. This would have been used for the 'Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary'.

It is possible that Benolt was using the word 'quire' in a very loose sense indeed and that he was referring to the chancel.

4. There is also the problem of the use of the word 'presbytery'. This could be read as contradicting the observation that the tomb was in the 'myddst of the high Quyre'. As I have mentioned above, it is possible that the word 'presbytery' is here being used in a more general sense, meaning the whole priests' area, perhaps equivalent to the chancel. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the term has been used and we need to take note of it.



## PART 6 - CONCLUSIONS

Combining the evidence above, to what extent is it possible to locate Henry's tomb and the abbot's place in the choir?

We can categorise the sources as follows

1. General architectural features. These are general principles which we may reasonably assume to be applicable to Reading Abbey. (Part 1)
2. Special features relevant to Reading Abbey, such as the number and size of the choir stalls, the existence of a pulpitum, evidence of tiles and sculpture etc (Part 2)
3. Evidence from the primary source of the *Reading Abbey Records* which gives strong indications about the possible positions of the abbot's seat and the tomb. (Parts 3 and 4)
4. Other written evidence concerning the appearance of the chancel and the location of Henry's tomb (Part 5)

### EXAMINATION OF THE THEORIES CONCERNING THE LOCATION OF THE ABBOT'S SEAT AND OF THE TOMB OF HENRY I

As I believe the most compelling evidence points to the first and second theories being the most plausible, I am presenting these in reverse order.

**THEORY 4.** I think this is the least likely theory. It demands quite a complex set of explanations to make it sit comfortably with the other evidence. This theory works only if the seat mentioned here, *sedile*, is not the Abbot's choir stall but part of a *sedilia* designated for the celebrants at Mass. However, we should not overlook the fact that this part of the manuscript is indeed talking about Mass, as it refers to the ceremonial after the Office Hour of Sext, that is the normal time for Mass.

There are several problems in siting the tomb in such close proximity to the altar. First of all, for it to be "next to", *iuxta*, the Abbot's *sedile*, the tomb would have had to be on the raised area of the sanctuary, up at least three steps, in front of the altar. This would have been virtually impossible without interfering with the ceremonial of the Mass. To place the tomb slightly lower down, below the steps leading to the altar, in the presbytery, would entail removing it from its reported position 'next to' the Abbot. One option is that the *sedile* was a movable item and was placed near the tomb, and then moved back nearer the altar during Mass. But if this was the case, it would not have served in the role of a *sedilia*, alongside the altar, begging the question as to its very *raison d'être*. A greater problem is Benolt's statement that the tomb was in the midst of the high choir. If this was the case it is difficult to see how the word *sedile* referred to the Abbot's place as the main celebrant at Mass.

Nevertheless, I have placed this potential location on the aerial view of the Abbey chancel area as it appears today.

**THEORY 3.** Although theoretically possible, I think that it is the least likely of the remaining options. The Abbot of Reading was not just an observer of the ceremonial; he played a pivotal role in the liturgy. The Abbot, or Father of his community, had a duty to be present and take an active role in the ceremonies. It would appear that the abbots of Reading took this duty seriously, or at least were instructed to do so, in such liturgical instructions as we find in the *Reading Abbey Records*. As such, if his seat was in this position, it would have been difficult, but not impossible, for him to fulfil such complicated rituals. We have also seen the logistical problem of conducting the elaborate ceremonies, with so many clerics involved, if the tomb and the great lectern were in such close proximity one to another.

**THEORY 2.** I believe this has the edge over Theory 1. It overcomes the problems of Theory 1. Theory 2 does allow for an interpretation that the tomb could have been considered to lie not just in the choir but also in the presbytery. The tomb's position would have been similar to that of Henry's brother King William, at Winchester and that of his great grandson King John, at Worcester. This theory does however presuppose that the *sedile* is the Abbot's choir seat and not his seat as the celebrant at Mass. If this was the case we must needs revert to Theory 4.

**THEORY 1.** If we were just speculating on the location of the abbot's seat, this would be the preferred option. It leaves it open to propose two possibilities:

1. That the tomb was near the abbot's seat in choir or
2. That there are two seats referred to in the manuscript; one in the choir, the "stall", and the other the "sedile" in the presbytery or sanctuary. We have looked at the problems caused by this latter theory. Once again we should note that if the seat was on or near the sanctuary, this appears to contradict Benolt's evidence that the tomb was in the midst of the high quire.

The main problem with its location in Theory 1, to the far west of the choir at its entrance through the pulpitum, is a negative one. That is, although the balance of opinion is that the Abbot's seat was often, if not normally, placed immediately on entering the choir from the nave, and so to the far west of the chancel, we have to face both the logistical ceremonial problems and the written evidence which places the tomb in the presbytery, though this could be interpreted as being in the midst of the choir.

Having considered the text of the *Reading Abbey Records*, the other documents which reference the tomb, along with the architectural evidence such as at Winchester and Worcester, I am inclined for the moment to believe that the word *sedile* is referring to the abbot's choir seat and that Henry's tomb was at the east end of the choir stalls. The main problem is over the interpretation of one simple word, *sedile*. Was the writer merely using this in its common meaning of 'a seat' or was he talking about a specific liturgical artefact which today we refer to as the *sedilia*?

## PART 7 - THE ABBEY SITE TODAY

### POSSIBLE LOCATIONS OF THE ABBOT'S SEAT AND OF THE TOMB OF HENRY I POSITIONED ON THE CURRENT BUILDINGS

The map on the page opposite shows the possible sites for the altar, the Abbot's seat and Henry's tomb, when superimposed on a modern aerial view of the area. Today the Abbey chancel is occupied by school buildings and by the car park of the former prison. The school was built in the 1870s with additions in the early and mid-20th century. The car park is where the walls and towers of the 1840s Gaol once stood. These were demolished in the 1960s and the area converted into a car park. It was at this time, in the late 1960s and '70s, that Dr Slade undertook his archaeological excavations of the site.

The 1870s OS map, (fig. 1). shows the outer wall of the Abbey and, rather more difficult to make out, the wall of the prison and the tower. I have marked with blue dots the remnants of the inner apse of the ambulatory as shown on the OS map. I have also highlighted the suggested position of the altar, as marked on the OS map, with a yellow rectangle

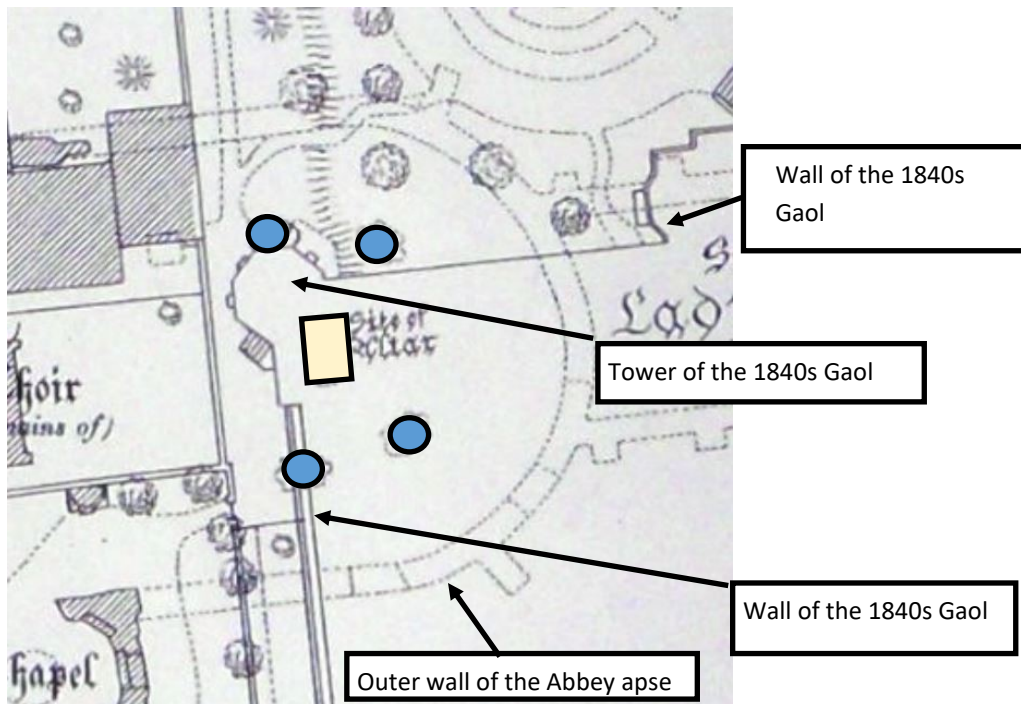


Fig. 1 1870s OS map

#### Key to the aerial photograph on page 31

- A** The sanctuary and site of the High Altar
- B** Possible site of the pulpitum as shown by the GPR survey

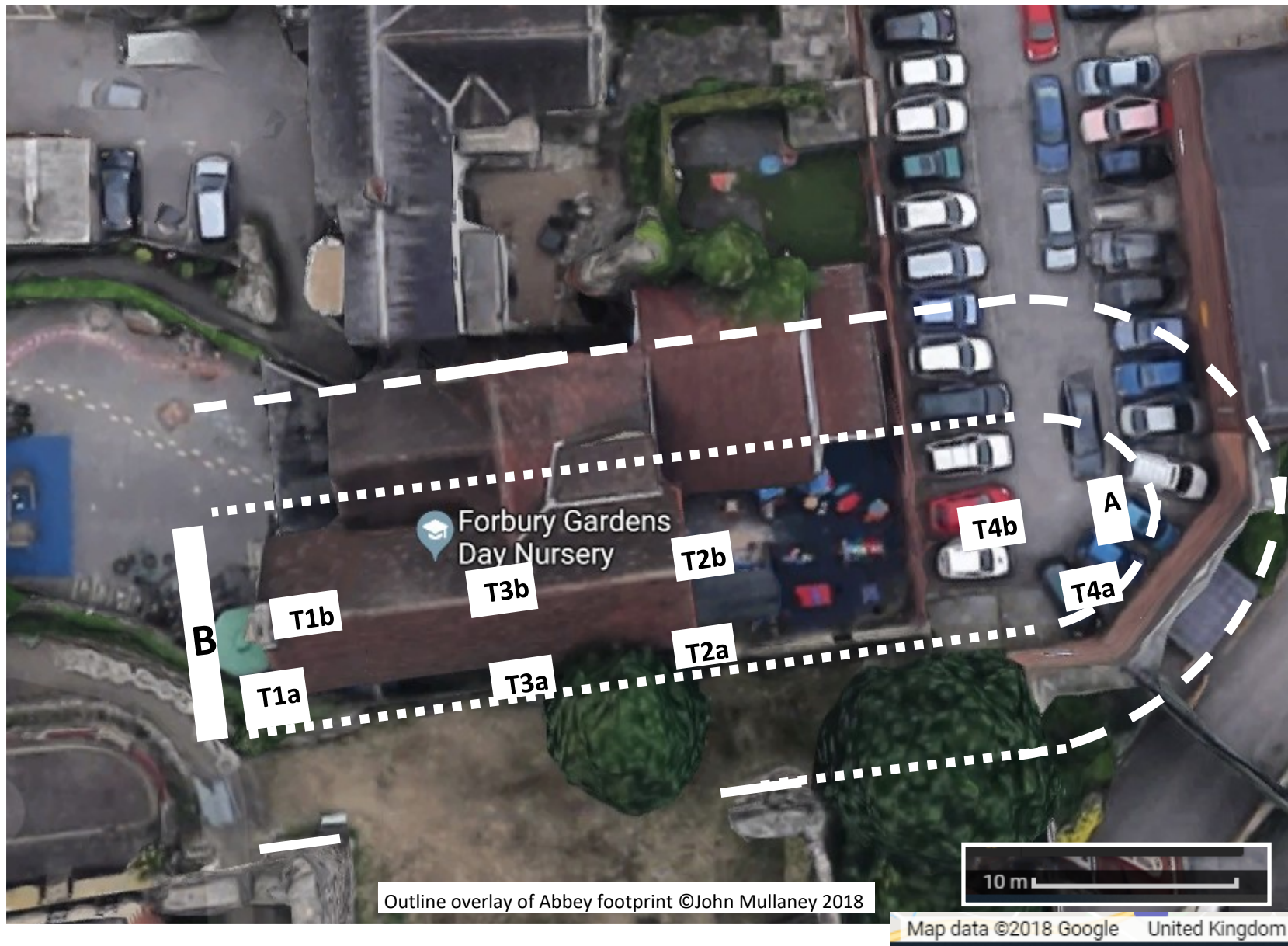
<b>THEORY 1.</b>	<b>T1a</b>	Abbot's seat	<b>T1b</b>	Henry's tomb
<b>THEORY 2.</b>	<b>T2a</b>	"	<b>T2b</b>	"
<b>THEORY 3.</b>	<b>T3a</b>	"	<b>T3b</b>	"
<b>THEORY 4.</b>	<b>T4a</b>	"	<b>T4b</b>	"

**DASHES** indicate no standing remains but GPR and earlier excavations show their location

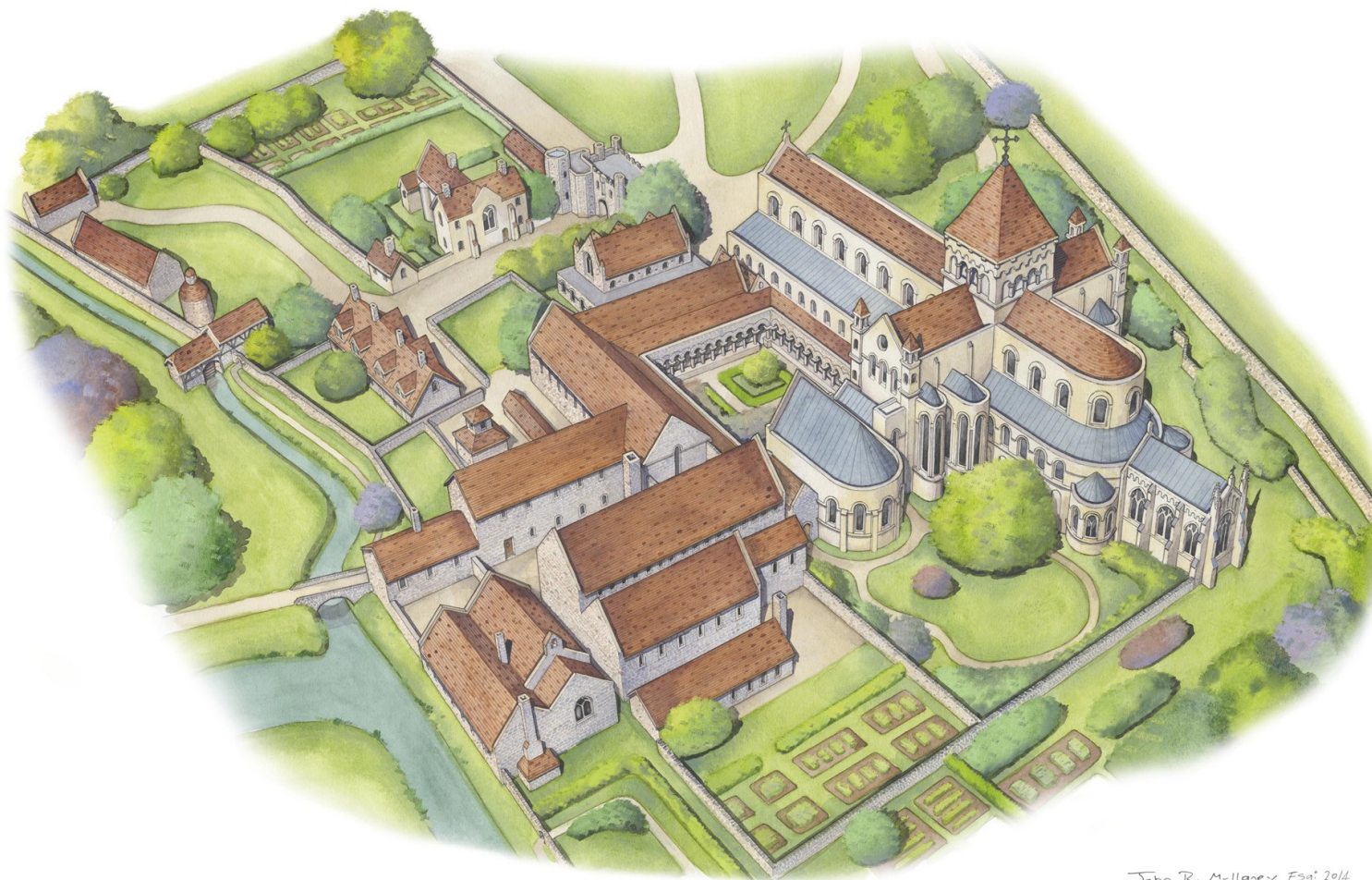
**DOTS** indicate few, or no, remains or archaeological evidence

**SOLID LINE** indicates standing ruins

To simplify the map I have omitted the transepts.







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Reconstruction of Reading Abbey after 1314

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