



**Friends
of
Reading
Abbey**

DEMOLITION AND EXCAVATION AT READING ABBEY

Note by BR Kemp and CF Slade

1964

Editor's Notes

This paper in typescript was passed to the Friends of Reading Abbey by Professor Brian Kemp, FORA's co-founder and later President, before his death in 2019. Kemp graduated in History at Reading University in 1961, and then continued post-graduate research under Dr Cecil Slade, whose study of the history of Reading Abbey Kemp took up and developed. Kemp completed his PhD on Reading Abbey in 1966, having already started his career as Assistant Lecturer in History at the University of Reading in 1964.

Kemp described this paper as Cecil Slade's notes on Reading Abbey, although it reads as the work of a research student, and the original is annotated in what looks like Kemp's hand. It would have been compiled at the start of Kemp's PhD research. FORA have had it word processed for electronic publication, in memory of Brian Kemp and Cecil Slade. The punctuation and abbreviations are as in the original.

The paper is dated 1964. Over the 60 years since then more excavations have taken place in the Abbey Precinct, not least that undertaken by Slade in the early 1970s in the area of the prison car park. Other research has suggested that the Leper Hospital was located away from the Abbey precinct, at a site in East Reading near to Cemetery Junction; and that the Abbot's Lodgings were more likely situated to the east of the inner Gateway, rather than to the west, beneath what is now the County Court. The location of the Great Hall of the Abbey is still a matter for conjecture.

Notes concerning Demolition and Excavation at Reading Abbey

- I. The demolition and excavation of Reading Abbey are both badly documented. This is due to its being located in a developing urban area and to the fact that the complex of buildings did not remain in one hand after the Dissolution. By a date soon after the mid-nineteenth century the varying fates that befell areas of the site can be clearly seen:
 - a. The complex of buildings centring on the chapter house and including the S. transepts and the dormitory (still standing as ruins)

These formed part first [of] a royal palace and then came into private hands. Later building here was insignificant & subsequently demolished.

This area having come into the hands of the Corporation in 1854 was “dug over to a depth of between 2 and 5 feet.”

b. The cloister, offices, abbot’s lodging (presumed), chancel, infirmary &c (no longer visible above ground)

Much of these were demolished by mid 17th century and subsequent building has covered the foundations, some of which were destroyed in these building operations. See Section III.

c. The nave of the church and the Forbury area (no longer visible above ground)

The nave of the church was virtually destroyed during the Civil wars. It was probably blown up to give a clear field of fire from the defensive works that were constructed across the Forbury. From this area came stone and gravel for building. It was acquired by the Corporation in 1835, and, like (a), parts seem to have been dug over.

d. Surviving buildings (standing with repairs; mill demolished except for 2 arches 1964)

The dormitory of the hospitium of St John the Baptist (1); the abbey mill; the inner gateway.

1. The Refectory of this demolished, 1784, in building of Town Hall

II. General Demolition and Plundering

1. 1539/40. Treasures &c. seized by royal commissioners, but no record of general plundering of fabric.
2. 1549 Stripping of lead from roof, sale of stone and timber &c. P.R.O. Ministers A/Cs Edw. VI. Divers Counties, Bdle 774: printed BAJ 39, 107-44.
3. 1550/3 42 and more cartloads of building material from Abbey. Churchwardens A/Sc, St Marys.
4. C. 1557. Knights’ Lodgings at Windsor built of stone from Abbey. Tighe and Davis I, 606.
5. 1560 [To repair the bridge in Reading.] And to dig take and carry away 200 loads of stones called ragged or free stones in the aforesaid late monastery of Reading. And to pull down carry and take two cottages or sheddes in the Graynge of the said late monastery and the timber and tiles of the same. And also to take pull down and carry away one house greatly ruined sityuate near the mill called the Abbey Mill in he aforesaid late monastery and the timber and tiles thereof. Charter, 2 Eliz (1560) Clause 52.

6. 1643-45 Destruction of nave of church during Civil Wars, and fortifications built across its site. The abbey lay on the line of the defences and the unrecorded destruction of the buildings must have been considerable. i.e.
 May 1644: "We are slighting the works here at Reading with all speed".
 Cal. S.P. Dom.1644-5, 163.
 July 1644: In the meantime we endeavour to stop the main passages and intend to fortify the abbey. Op. cit., 364
- What remained inhabitable of the Abbey buildings was apparently the complex west from the chapter house to the inner gateway and south of the Church to the Holy Brook; the mill and stables; the infirmary (or a later building near it); the porters lodge at the west gate; the buildings of the Hospitium of St John the Baptist. Parliamentary Survey, 1650; printed Coates pp. 267-71.
7. 1754: Stone from the Abbey to build a bridge between Henley and Wargrave.
 Hurry p. 142
8. To 19th Century: apparently a steady sale or plundering of stone above ground.

The result of this activity was to leave buildings of groups (a) (c) and (d) much as today.

III. Buildings of Group (b)

By the late 18th Century little of these except the walls of the refectory and the west wall of the cloister appeared above ground as shown in Englefield's plan, 1779 (See Englefield, below, IV, I). Subsequent activity resulted in the following:

1. Bake house (presumed): foundations largely destroyed in extending the Abbey Mill: 1860. V.C.H. Berks III, 339.
2. Stables: Site occupied by school attached to King's Road Baptist Chapel. Parts were again exposed in later building. 1869. See Albury, below.
3. Large building to right of Inner gate: 110' x 50'.
 Generally – & erroneously – identified a a leper house (1). Foundations destroyed in building the assize court in 1861.
 (1) In the 13th Century, there would appear to have been 12 lepers and 1 chaplain (Cott. Vesp. Ev. F 38)
4. Abbot's Lodging (presumed): seen in part during building operations in Abbot's Walk. See Darter below.

5. Chancel, Lady Chapel, North Transept, Infirmary (presumed): The foundations of these buildings on the N.E. of the site were largely destroyed during the building of St. James church, the school and the county gaol during the first half of the 19th Century.

IV. Records of Survey and Excavation

There has been no properly conducted excavation of any part of the Abbey. The only approach to an excavation (Albury, below, 1860-80) has left no extant excavation report. There has apparently been nothing other than minor & chance discoveries during the 20th Century.

1. Sir Henry Englefield

Observations on Reading Abbey

Sir Henry Englefield (Archaeologia, Vol. 6, p. 61 ff)

Paper reads to the Society, 13th May 1779.

A description of the ruins as they stood in 1779. The plan of the abbey church, cloister and conventual buildings is dated February, 1779.

Of the north transept, remained 2 "immense masses of wall pitched with violence endways into the ground".

The eastern end of the north side of the cloister remained, and to the east the eastern chapels of the south transept. South of the latter and separated from it by a "passage arched two stories high", was the "great hall" or chapter-house, open to the cloisters (at the western end) through three semi-circular arches with a window above each, and terminated at the eastern end by an apse with 5 large windows in it. The windows "have the appearance of an obtuse point, though the doors are every one round." The hall measured 42 ft. by 79 ft.

South again, was a small door and near it the remains of a staircase. The door opened "into a dark passage, once vaulted, and communicating with the cloisters by a great door". The area of the cloisters was then a garden.

The south side of the cloister was formed by "a great room, once the refectory and then (1779) accessible only through Mr Clement's house, its door of entrance into the cloisters being walled up. Room measured 38 ft. wide by at least 72 ft. long. The room had been highly ornamented with a row of intersecting arches (i.e. at near ground level) with "a sort of arcade" running above the lower row. Of the lower order only hollows in the wall remained, but the end of the room (i.e. the interior E. wall) had (1779) "ancient stone work in the upper order". These escaped destruction because "subsequent to the original building some alterations were made to this room when the arcades were filled up flush, and the whole wall stuccoed flat". By the late 18th Century, the plaster had peeled off.

The cloister wall at this point had 2 neat stone cupboards wrought in it & between them a rough foundation, probably of the sanatorium.

The west wall of the cloister was (1779) still 10 ft. high in its whole length. It had several doors in it, great & small.

Dimensions of the church deduced by Englefield were:

Eastern Chapel	102 ft. long	55 ft. wide
Choir	98 ft. long	34 ft. wide
Side aisles		19 ft. wide
Transept	196 ft. long	56 ft. wide
Nave probably	215 ft. long	

The west end was entirely destroyed. A "high rampart crosses the whole ruin through the cloister court" and across the nave, "& ended in a sort of horn work, commanding the Thames & its meadows northwards."

Englefield considered that "the side aisles seem to have been separated from the rest by continued walls, which still are in some parts 3 feet above the turf".

2. Pigott

Letter by F. Pigott to the Gent. Mag.
November 1785. (Vol. 55, page 881)

The letter is dated Pelling Place, Berks. 1st November

Extracts:-

"It lately happened, that the workmen employed in digging a foundation for the erection of a house of correction at Reading, in Berkshire, on the spot where the old abbey stood, that divers bones were thrown up: this being the burial place of Henry I each bone was seized as a kind of treasure, contemplating it as one of the King's, till at length a vault was discovered, the only one there, and which was of curious workmanship: in the vault was a leaden coffin almost devoured by time. A perfect skeleton remained therein, and which undoubtedly was the King's ..." "Fragments of rotten leather were found in the coffin". The bones were divided among the spectators and the coffin sold to a plumber. The under jaw-bone was sent to the author. It contained 26 teeth perfect and round.

3. Nares

Rev. Robert Nares: "Observations on the Discovery of part of a Sarcophagus at Reading Abbey (etc)."
(Archaeologia, 18, page 272 ff)

On 24th November 1815, in digging for some dry earth or gravel to assist in making a footway to our National Schools, there was found not 3 ft. below the surface, a large fragment of a stone sarcophagus, or rather coffin. It was the bottom of it only, and was broken into two parts. It exhibited the bottom and bases of the shafts, of a complete row of small columns, or rather half columns, which evidently surrounded the whole coffin. They were varied, alternately semi-circular and semi-hexagonal. Dimensions of coffin: 7 ft x 2'6", at the head, gradually tapering to 2 ft at the smaller end. Thickness of stone, 7½". There were originally 50 of the columns: 18 on each side, 8 at the broad end, 6 at the narrower end. Six very strong iron rings had been let into the substance of the stone, and soldered in with lead: viz 2 on each side & 1 at each end, at regular distances.

The stone was not found in a vault and no other fragments of the coffin were found.

The site must have been near the centre of the Choir of the Abbey Church, "but it had probably been moved from its original situation, broken, & left upon the surface, the small quantity of earth found above it, being evidently such as had gradually accumulated on the spot." No bones near it. N.B. this letter to the Ed. Is dated 10th Feb. 1816.

4. Man

History of Reading: J. Man; p.261

On digging lately (c.1813) within the walls of the Chapter House the foundations of the walls of this room were found to be seven feet deep and twelve feet thick to the set off; above which the walls were six feet thick as in other parts of the building.

5. Albury

F.W. Albury (Fellow Inst. Brit. Archts.)

"Reading Abbey, its History & Architecture

[Transactions of the Berks. Archaeological & Architectural Society, 1880-1]"

The plan "I have prepared with great care & accuracy from actual survey of the existing remains and records of foundations, I have from time to time collected from various sources as well as from actual discovery, during the carrying out of several works under my direction within the precincts, over a period of 20 yrs."

Traces of the wall surrounding the Abbey precincts can be traced in the meadow below the county gaol, and traces of it were lately to be observed on the northern bank of the Holy Brook, when it was opened for the new drainage works. Its foundations were recently visible in a line with Blake's Bridge, where a new factory has been built.

Of the 4 entrance gates, the second stood at the back of the “Saracen’s Head” yard, on a spot now occupied by the Abbey Institute; a third close to the public-house in the Forbury called “The Rising Sun”; & the fourth was close to Blake’s Bridge.

The leper house lay on the right within the Inner Gateway. Its foundations were dug out in building the new County Assize Courts. A plan taken by Mr. Clancy at the time showed it to be about 110 ft. long and 50 ft. wide, the largest apartment being about 60 ft. x 45 ft. 3 bodies were found to have been buried in the foundations.

The Abbot’s House probably stood on the left, adjoining the gateway. A survey of May, 1650, taken by order of Parliament, mentions “two cellars, two butteries, a hall, a parlour, a dining room, ten chambers, a garret with a large gallery, & other small rooms, with two court yards and a large gatehouse, with several rooms adjoining the said house.” Some traces of the foundations of this house were found when the house next to the Abbey gateway was being built. No record was kept of them.

In the south cloister, the stone cupboards & remains of the lavatorium no longer exist, nor the west cloister wall [by implication].

The Parliamentary survey refers to: “there is on the east side of the Mansion House (i.e. the Chapter House) a great old hall, with a very large cellar under it, arched, and some other decayed rooms between the hall & the Manson House, with the ruins of an old chapel, a kitchen, and several other rooms fit to be demolished.”

The stables are remembered as partly & tending on a spot adjoining the Holy Brook, on the side of the Schools attached to King’s Road chapel, and adjoining premises; foundations of portions of these buildings were discovered when the new buildings were being erected, “enabling me to get the exact width & the position of (the) walls”.

The Church Dimensions	Length 450 ft.	Width 95 ft.
Transepts	200 ft. x 75 ft.	
Nave	200 ft. long	
Eastern Chapel	75 ft. x 50 ft.	
Choir	90 ft. x 34 ft.	
Central Tower	45 ft. square	

These dimensions are from actual measurements of the remains and foundations. They differ from those of Englefield & those of Powell (collections for a history of Berkshire), but they have been traced with considerable excavations, “which have since from time to time been made.”

See the letter written in 1835 to “the Reading Mercury” by Mr. J. Wheble, F.S.A., on the Reading Abbey stone (now the font in St James’ R.C. church), which suggests that when the stone was discovered, 24th January 1835, excavations were proceeding in the area of the choir and its north aisle.

This letter is printed as an appendix to the above paper.

6. Okey Taylor

J. Okey Taylor: "Reading Abbey"

(Journal of the Berks. Archaeological & Architectural Soc. Vol. 1 (Oct. 1890)

For many years prior to 1857 the position of the site of the Abbey now the adjunct to the Public Gardens, together with the riverside land up to Blake's Bridge, was the property of private individuals, & was purchased by the Local Authority. About the same time, there was much distress in the town owing to exceptionally severe frosts. A relief fund raised. Large no. of men employed in excavating the Abbey ruins under the supervision of a committee including the author. The entire site was excavated to a depth varying from two to five feet, the soil removed being taken to form the river frontage and embankment to Blake's Bridge. Many stones were found with carved work upon them buried in the soil. They now lie around the ruins, some worked into the arch over the pathway leading to the ruins from the Forbury Gardens. The bases of 7 large columns were found on the north side of the Abbey grounds, no doubt the supporting columns of the arches of the nave.

"Passing the Chapter House on the west side and turning through the arch to the left leading to the area where now the shows of the Reading Hort. Soc. are held, and running due east commencing from this arch, was discovered some very interesting tessalated [tessellated] pavement, which when first exposed was apparently in a condition of good preservation, but after being open a little time, I suppose from the action of the air, it crumbled so much that it was thought better to recover it with earth, and there it probably remains to this day."

The chimney-piece or "tomb canopy" in the south transept was presented by Mr. Lovejoy who said he believed it to have come from the Ancient Establishment of the Greyfriars.

About 1860, the magistrates of the county decided to erect the Assize Courts on the ground immediately adj. to the Gateway. This was set back several feet from the line originally intended, in order to preserve the view of the gateway.

7. Darter

Darter: "Reminiscences of Reading" (1888)

The author, an octogenarian of Reading, writes on pp. 16-18 (January 1881)

"Before the present gaol was built there was a good sized meadow between the great hall of the Abbey (where the National Schools of the period were situate), over which were lying large blocks of the ruins, and about the year 1810 or 1811 there were two members of the Society of friends, living in the upper part of London Street, who used to

preach in the Abbey Ruins". "One day I was amusing myself amongst the ruins..., when I saw a lot of prisoners, dressed in yellow & blue, digging around a tall piece of the ruins with the evident intention of pulling it down..., but it resisted their efforts. At this moment other men were forming a road from the main one in the Forbury as an approach to the National Schools, which had then been recently erected within the Abbey walls, and was [sic] intended for the children from all three parishes... I went to the spot (where the men were forming the road) and saw that the labourers had found something of interest, which proved to be a stone coffin..." The clumsy labourers broke the stone in two. As far as Darter could remember in 1881, the coffin had ornamental columns all around the outer edge, the latter being about 3 in. thick, and these were broken to within a few inches of a little moulding at the base. This discovery took place apparently some 70 yrs. previous to the date of writing.

About 40 yrs. previously (i.e. c. 1845), he bought a portion of Abbey land, and digging out the foundation, came upon a block of ruin, probably 6 ft. thick. A hole was cut in it & with the aid of gunpowder it was blown asunder.... On the same spot & at a depth of about 4 ft. from the present road, the workmen came upon a chapel floor, some of which was covered with tessalated [tessellated] pavement; some of the tiles broken by the fall of surrounding flintwork. In the centre of this floor stood a plain round pedestal of stone, c. 3 ft. high & 1 ft. in diameter, with a plinth and a bead at the bottom, and completely flattened off at the top. "I have this relic at my house now."

The tessalated [tessellated] floor completely disappeared one Sunday. Nos. 7 & 8, Abbots Walk stand on the exact spot.

There is a spring of water, called the conduit, situate near Highgrove which was supposed by the credulous to possess medicinal properties, because from this source the Abbey had been supplied with water; & in confn. of this a lead pipe in a perfect condition was found in cutting the new straight channel below High Bridge, by which the navigation of the Kennet was greatly improved, & this pipe was supposed to be part of that originally used as stated.

8. Guilting

Guilting: "Notable Events in the Municipal History of Reading" (Reading, 1875)

1786 Old Town Hall over the Free School rebuild, involving the destruction of the Guest Room or Hall of St. John the Baptist Hospital, which had a row of pillars supporting pointed arches extending along the centre. Probably 14th Century work.

1793 County Jail erected on site of Cemetery of the Abbey Church. An embalmed band, supposedly to be that of St. James, discovered; but more probably the hand of Queen Adeliza.

1812 First National School opened in the Chapter House of the Abbey, on Dr. Bell's system, for the three combined parishes. [No. of children educated in the Reading schools at this time was about 900]

1819 Stone sarcophagus in Abbey Choir discovered.
[Note. Nares, more reliable, gives 1815]

1840 Erection of St. James' R.C. Church (Pugin) on site of Tower and N. Transept of Abbey, thus obliterating "large section of the Abbey Ruins."

1843 Erection of new County Jail, as Model Prison on separate system, on site of the Lady Chapel & Infirmary of Abbey.

1861 Assize Courts erected in Forbury. Abbey Ruins purchased by the Corporation.

1862 Opening of Forbury Gardens. Restoration of Abbey Gateway by G. Scott.

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