



**FRIENDS
OF
READING
ABBEY**

NEWSLETTER

AUTUMN 2019

Patrons:

The Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire

The MP for Reading East

The Right Worshipful the Mayor of Reading

The MP for Reading West

The Right Reverend the Bishop of Reading

The Vice Chancellor, Reading University

The Abbot of Douai

President: Vacant

Vice Presidents: Janet Bond Leslie Cram



You are warmly invited to our
Annual General Meeting
Saturday 26 October 2019 at 2.30pm
(doors open at 2.00pm)

Greyfriars Church, Friar Street, Reading RG1 1EH

Following the AGM our talk this year will be on

The Grey Friars in Reading 1233-1538
by Malcolm Summers



Malcolm Summers is the Treasurer of the History of Reading Society and enjoys researching and writing about local history. Malcolm's talk will be based on his current research which he hopes to publish in due course. His most recent book, *Signs of the Times: Reading's Memorials*, was published in June by Two Rivers Press. He has been a member of Greyfriars Church since coming to Reading and has written about the history of the church. Copies of *History of Greyfriars Church, Reading* are available from Greyfriars Bookshop.

ALL ARE WELCOME - ENTRY IS FREE

www.readingabbey.org.uk



SUMMER 2019

WATERFEST – SATURDAY 15 JUNE 2019

Our first summer event was Waterfest and again we set up our stand on the busy Chestnut Walk. The changeable weather didn't deter the crowds and people flocked to enjoy what was on offer along the Kennet, the Forbury Gardens and of course, the **Abbey Ruins**.

The Friends of Reading Abbey focussed on canvassing public opinion on ways to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the Abbey which is fast approaching in 2021. The response was overwhelming, and some options received royal approval! Committee member Iris Hunt spent many hours collating over 800 ideas submitted on the day.



The three receiving most support were: *Plays and Musical Events within the Ruins; A Town Carnival/Party; and a Medieval Town Market*. Thanks to all who stopped by and took the time to take part. We're extremely grateful to those members who volunteered to help on our stand and to Reading Museum for the loan of tables. Our partners in this event, The Friends of Reading Museum, had a busy time with visitors keen to view objects from the abbey displayed on their stand and there was also an opportunity to sign Matt Rodda's 'Save Reading Gaol' petition. As always, Waterfest provided much to see and do - reflected in these photos from the day.



FORA OUTING 24 JULY 2019: This year's Friends' outing took place on one of the hottest days of the year, but the extreme heat didn't deter the doughty band that met at Reading station for the start of the tour, which took us to Cholsey, Wallingford and Dorchester. At **Cholsey**, we were welcomed by the Vicar, Andrew Petit. We saw the magnificent cruciform Norman church of St Mary (built on the site of a Saxon monastery, and one of the first properties of Reading Abbey) and the site of the medieval barn (now sadly destroyed) as well as visiting the grave of Agatha Christie.

After a stop for coffee in **Wallingford** at the Old Post Office, we enjoyed a visit to the 17th century Town Hall (where the grandfather of one of our members was listed on the board of previous Mayors) and to the Museum, which housed a new display highlighting recent research into the history of Wallingford Castle, and a charming room devoted to the life of Agatha Christie.



St Mary's Church, Cholsey

Lastly, to **Dorchester**, and after a splendid tea in the Abbey tea rooms, we visited the Abbey itself. The fine abbey church is all that remains of the original complex of buildings, but an imaginative recreation of the south cloister walk houses an excellent display of carved stones unearthed from the site. *Peter Durrant*

More photos from the Annual Outing - by kind permission of Chris Widdows



Grave of Agatha Christie



Elegant Interior of Wallingford Town Hall



Dorchester Abbey

FRIENDS' FIRST SUNDAY EVENT, 4 AUGUST

People arrived in large numbers on this sunny afternoon, to enjoy one of Caversham Court Garden's 'First Sundays'. The Mayor of Reading, Councillor Paul Woodward and the Mayoress, Lyndsey Montgomery supported the event, and both were keen to hear about the activities of the Friends of Reading Abbey. Our stand received many visitors and the History Trail proved popular - with all ages. Once again we asked the public for their ideas on how best to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey, in 2021. These were put onto post-it-notes and the results will be shared with relevant parties within the Abbey Quarter Team and Reading Borough Council. The weather remained fine, and the fun dog show held on the day was a great hit. Music from the Salvation Army band along with a well-stocked Tea Kiosk, added to a perfect afternoon by the river.

We're very grateful to our hosts, The Friends of Caversham Court Gardens, for inviting us to take part in this event. If you've not already done so, we urge you to visit these beautiful gardens.



The Mayoress studies clues on the History Trail, while dad and daughter duo are keen to start.



A REMINDER that your membership runs from 1 September to 31 August and subs remain at:

Single: £7 Family: £10 Society/Commercial: £15 Life: £105

Payment can be made by Standing Order (see website for details); by Electronic Transfer to Lloyds Bank, Sort Code 77-49-04, Account 60275168 (referenced with your name), or by post to: Prof. Francoise

Le Saux, Treasurer, 25 The Crescent, Reading Berks RG6 7NW (Cheques payable to Friends of Reading Abbey).

Your support is very important and enables us to continue to promote awareness of Reading Abbey through our lectures, literature and events

**MEMBERSHIP
RENEWAL**

THE BATTLE FOR READING GAOL: In April 2019 the Ministry of Justice, which owns the Grade-II listed building, announced it intended to sell the site later this year. This prompted campaigners to begin the battle to stop the site being developed. The Museum of London have carried out an archaeological survey, which will of course have a bearing on any plans for the Gaol. Theatre and Arts Reading (TAR) have put forward a scheme to turn the prison into an arts/community facility that they say will benefit Reading residents and help boost the town's reputation regionally, nationally and internationally. Their plans to develop the site as a hub for the creative and performing arts, and as an interactive site of literary and cultural heritage have received strong support from an eminent Oscar Wilde scholar and academic, Professor Anne Varty of the Department of English at Royal Holloway University of London. Oscar Wilde spent two years at the jail between 1895 and 1897 and wrote about his experience in his poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.



Meanwhile, in July, Reading East MP Matt Rodda met with then Prison Minister, Robert Buckland to discuss the site's future. The MP has now started a petition to preserve the site and called on the government "not to sell it off to the highest bidder". He's promoting the petition throughout Reading and it's online at <https://mattroddamp.com/stopreadinggaolselloff>.

DIARY DATES

- 10 October** **Launchpad's Big Sleep Out** held this year in Reading Abbey Ruins, raises vital funds to help prevent homelessness. 7pm to 7am. Details on website <https://www.launchpadreading.org.uk/big-sleep-out-at-reading-abbey-ruins/>
- 12/13 October** **British Association of Friends of Museums Annual Conference.** BAFM is a national body promoting museums and has its annual conference this year at Reading Town Hall and Museum, hosted by the Friends of Reading Museum. They hope that some FORA members may wish to attend the conference as delegates. Here is the link to the booking form <http://www.bafm.co.uk/2019/05/23/bafm-national-conference-agm-2019/>. The conference on Saturday will start at 09.45 (registration) and finish with a reception for delegates at 18.30. Sunday has a programme of tours and visits. If interested, please follow the above link or phone 0118 937 3400. FORA will have a presence in the conference room to promote Reading Abbey.
- 13 October 2pm** **Reading Gaol Hug** - Linked to the campaign for an arts hub in the gaol. Free to take part, but you need to register interest through Eventbrite. For more details, and to register, visit the website at <https://readinggaolhug.uk/wp/>
- 16 October** **The History of Reading Gaol** - a talk by Terry Dixon: 8pm at Caversham Heights Methodist Hall. Phone Caversham Heights Society on 0118 947 9970 for details, or check their website www.cavershamheights.org.

PROFESSOR BRIAN RICHARD KEMP President of The Friends of Reading Abbey Born 25 March 1940, died 12 August 2019

The news of Brian's death on 12 August 2019, at the age of 79, came with shock and sadness to all people with a love of the Abbey and an interest in its history, architecture, conservation and promotion. Brian Kemp and Reading Abbey go together: it is hard to think of one without the other. Brian was the recognised local expert and first point of contact on all matters concerning the Abbey. Therefore his erudition and enthusiasm will be very much missed. Brian was a founder member of the Friends of Reading Abbey, in 1986, when the Abbey Ruins were closed to the public on safety grounds and in need of repair and conservation, and he served FORA continuously for the next 33 years, as Chairman and latterly as President. Brian was born in 1940. The family moved to Reading in 1951, when he attended Woodley Hill House grammar school in Earley, and went on to study at Reading University in 1958, graduating in 1961 with a first class degree in History. He continued post-graduate research at Reading University under Dr Cecil Slade, whose study of Reading Abbey he took up and developed. He completed his PhD in 1966, having already started his career as an Assistant Lecturer in History at the University in 1964. Brian became the recognised academic authority on Reading Abbey, publishing his guide to *Reading Abbey* in 1986, whilst also working on the Reading Abbey Cartularies, which he published as two volumes in 1986-7. His last work, *Reading Abbey Records: a new miscellany*, was published by the Berkshire Record Society (volume 25) in 2018, to coincide with the Abbey Ruins re-opening. Brian had a strong commitment to FORA, attending our spring and autumn public meetings up to this year's Spring Lecture, and inspired and led our annual outings up to 2018.



The full Obituary can be seen on our website and Facebook page.

Photo: Chris Widdows