

THE FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

SPRING NEWSLETTER 2024



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: Janet Bond

Vice President: John Mullaney

BRIAN KEMP MEMORIAL LECTURE

Saturday 2 March at 2.30pm
St James' RC Church, Forbury Road, RG1 3FD

**Monks, miracles and memory: the dissolution of
Reading Abbey and the writing of history in
Reformation England**
Professor Helen Parish

The lecture takes as its starting point the dissolution of Reading Abbey, and the accompanying efforts made to suppress the cult of relics and miracle narratives associated with them. As Reformation polemicists turned to the narratives of the past to construct a history and identity in their present, monasticism and the miraculous occupied an increasingly contested space. At Reading, and elsewhere, the struggle to preserve and to possess the monastic past began almost immediately; monks, miracles and memory became a visual and verbal mnemonic in the reconstruction of religious history.



We will examine in more detail the physical and polemical assault upon 'monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition' and its impact upon memory and the reimagining of the past in post-Reformation England.

Helen Parish is a Visiting Professor in History at the University of Reading, and Senior Tutor at Worcester College, Oxford.

**St James' RC Church is next to Reading Gaol, in the Abbey Precinct.
It will be open from 2.00pm. Free entry, with a voluntary retiring collection.
All are welcome.**

AGM AND AUTUMN LECTURE, 28 OCTOBER 2023

We had an excellent attendance for our October 23 AGM and Autumn Lecture, when a total of 75 people gathered at the Abbey Baptist Church. The Chairman, Dr Peter Durrant began by welcoming everyone and then presented his report.

FORA had continued to be active in promoting interest in the Abbey, and awareness of its history and continuing significance today. He noted with pleasure the re-printing of Brian Kemp's 1968 *Guide to Reading Abbey*, which remained the best short work on the subject; the re-printing by Two Rivers Press of *Reading Abbey & the Abbey Quarter*; and the publication by John Mullaney of *Reading Abbey: a Pilgrim Church*. Copies of all three publications were on sale at the meeting.

Current FORA membership hovered around the 200 mark, a good number, but with a slight decline over the past year. The challenge in 2023/24 was to arrest and reverse that decline, and to attract new, and in particular, younger members. The Friends could be promoted through publicity and an active programme of events, but personal invitation was the most effective way of recruitment, and he encouraged individual members to do this.

The Secretary, John Painter, circulated a written report on the work of the FORA Committee during 2022-23, which was the first full year not impacted by post-COVID restrictions. Activities had included a Zoom winter talk, the Caversham Pilgrimage Trail, Reading Walks Festival, Water Fest and a Summer Outing to London.

The AGM was followed by the Autumn Lecture given by **Professor Lindy Grant**, who gave a fascinating illustrated talk comparing the different dynastic arrangements made for burying the royal dead in the twelfth century. The full Secretary's Annual Report can be read on our website www.readingabbey.org.uk.



Dr Peter Durrant with Professor Lindy Grant, and a small section of the audience

JOINT COFFEE MORNING AT RISC, WEDNESDAY 4 OCTOBER 2023

FORA and THE FRIENDS OF READING MUSEUM held a joint coffee morning at RISC (Reading International Solidarity Centre) in London Street. As well as being a very enjoyable get together, it was an opportunity to see the number of stones used from Reading Abbey to form part of the fabric of the building, and some that were found during renovation works.

Martin Mikhail (Centre Co-ordinator) kindly took time to explain the work of RISC and to cover some of the building's long history. Before RISC took over the premises in 1995, the property had lain empty for 6 years, and had previously housed the London Street Bookshop. Then began the huge restoration task when RISC moved in, in September 1996.

A permaculture roof garden was created in 2002, which includes an extensive collection of Abbey stones and provides a pretty green space in this built up area. Also on site is a World Shop which stocks many Fair-Trade goods and attractive gifts.



DIARY DATES FOR 2024

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| 2 March | The Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture (<i>see front page</i>). |
| 8 June | Water Fest. <i>Once again, FORA are pleased to be joining other heritage groups within the South Transept (with acoustic bands only)!</i> |
| 26 October | AGM and Autumn Lecture. Given by David Sanchez , the lecture will be on Medieval Tilers in Silver Street, Reading. |
| To Be Arranged | Cleaning Interpretation Signs. The session arranged for 9 January was cancelled due to the extreme cold weather. Once we have the new date this will be circulated to members, inviting them to help maintain the appearance of the Abbey Quarter in a practical way and to engage with the Museum's Reading Abbey team. Anyone can volunteer! |
| To Be Arranged | The Friend's Summer Outing. |
| 11 - 19 May | Reading Walks Festival. FORA are pleased to be offering a walk again, and we will give more information once the programme has been finalised. |

RE-LOCATION OF READING CENTRAL LIBRARY

In October 2023, we were made aware of around 15 large stones embedded in the verge of Abbey Square, some with carvings, at the rear of the library. Committee Members Doug Beaumont and John Painter visited the site and formed the opinion that the blocks were of Taynton stone and very likely from the Abbey. As there are active plans to relocate the library to an extended Civic Offices in Bridge Street, John contacted both Matthew Williams at Reading Museum and Fiona MacDonald at Berkshire Archaeology to highlight the issue and concerns for the fate of the stones should the site be re-developed. An assurance was received from the Libraries Team that the stones were 'on their radar'.

Update: On 10 January 2024 Jason Brock, Leader of Reading Council announced that planning permission had been granted for a brand-new purpose-built modern Central Library for Reading at the redesigned Civic Offices. We will keep you informed of developments via our website and Facebook page. In the meantime we will include the stones in future FORA Abbey Quarter Tours.

Photos by Doug Beaumont



MINISTRY OF JUSTICE CONFIRMS SALE OF FORMER READING PRISON SITE

On 11 January 2024 (and widely reported in the media), the MOJ confirmed the sale of this historic site to a non-profit organisation, the Ziran Education Foundation. It stated that the sale followed an extensive bidding and vetting process to guarantee best value for taxpayers' money while ensuring future planning applications acknowledge the historic nature of the site. The Ziran Education Foundation will now engage with Reading Borough Council on the use of the site as it will need to approve any development plans.

The MoJ added that "Initial proposals included plans for an educational centre providing services to the local community, including a museum outlining the history of the prison and an exhibition space accessible to the public".

The Save Reading Gaol group had campaigned vigorously to save the gaol for the community as an arts venue, and a list of celebrities had backed the campaign. The MP for Reading East, Matt Rodda, says he wants to see more detail about the deal, but is cautiously optimistic. A statement from Reading Council Leader Jason Brock said: "While the confirmation of sale from the MoJ to the Council only contains scant detail at this stage, we welcome that the successful bid recognises the historical significance of this site to Reading, the wider region and nationally."

The Ziran Foundation describes itself as a "spiritual and holistic' foundation and was set up in 2018 by Chinese businessman, Channing Bi, who now lives in Ireland.



Save Reading Gaol Campaign event, 25 March 2023

