



**Friends
of
Reading
Abbey**

Professor Brian Kemp - Obituary

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 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. His erudition and enthusiasm will be very much missed.

Brian was a founder member of the Friends of Reading Abbey, in 1984, 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. Over this period Brian and FORA oversaw and supported two conservation programmes for the Abbey Ruins, in 1986-91, and 2015-18. He had a strong commitment to FORA, attended our spring and autumn public meetings up to this year's Spring Lecture, and inspired and led many of our annual outings up to 2018. Brian was delighted to see the conserved Abbey Ruins reopened to the public in the summer of 2018, following the £3.1M programme of works funded by the Council and Heritage Lottery, which has made the Abbey Ruins again the jewel in Reading's heritage crown.

Brian was born in 1940, in Lincolnshire. The family moved to Reading in 1951 with his father's appointment to run the Sutton Seeds trial beds. He went to grammar school in Earley (Woodley Hill House – which became what is now The Forest School, Winnersh), and then on to Reading University in 1958 where he graduated in History in 1961 with a first class degree.

He continued post-graduate research at Reading University, under Dr Cecil Slade, whose study of the history of Reading Abbey he took up and developed. Brian completed his PhD in 1966, having already started his career as an Assistant Lecturer in History at the University of Reading in 1964.

Brian became the recognised academic authority on Reading Abbey. He published *Reading Abbey: An introduction to the history of the Abbey*, in 1986, in conjunction with Reading Museum and Art Gallery. At the same time he was working on the Reading Abbey Cartularies, which he published as two volumes in the Royal Historical Society's Camden series in 1986-7. This required a working knowledge of Latin and an expertise in palaeography (the study of historic handwriting and documents). Through this and other work Brian became recognised as a leading expert on the history of the medieval church and its records. 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's interest in Reading Abbey was an extension of his more general interest in church architecture, monuments and records. His pioneering book on *English Church Monuments* published by Batsford in 1980, and his Shire booklet on Church Monuments, are still definitive guides to this subject. Brian was active for many years in the Church Monuments Society, serving as its President and remaining as a Vice-President until his death. He was also a much valued member of a number of other national academic committees concerning medieval church records; and was a Fellow of both the Society of Antiquaries and of the Royal Historical Society. His interest in palaeography generated an expertise on

medieval seals, a subject on which he wrote a number of papers, and informed a fine exhibition at the Berkshire Record Office in recent years.

For Brian the national and the local were equally important. For many years he served on the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches as well as on the committee of the Berkshire Churches Trust, which gave him an encyclopaedic knowledge of churches in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. He was also on the Standing Conference on Archives of the Berkshire Record Office.

Brian had a commitment to make history accessible to the general public, as shown by his 1986 guide to Reading Abbey, and his Shire guide to church monuments. It was also evident in his support for the Historical Association, where he was active in reviving the Reading branch in the 1960s, was President of it from 1975 to 1980, and attended its lectures regularly until his death. Throughout his academic life, and into retirement, he was pleased to give lectures and talks to local and national bodies on Reading Abbey and other areas of his expertise.

Brian was an active member of staff in the History Department of Reading University for nearly 40 years, from 1964 to 2002, being made Professor in 1990. He retired partially in 2001, and fully one year later with the title of Emeritus Professor. He was an active member of the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies, and continued to teach palaeography to the MA students into his retirement. He was honoured to be awarded a D Litt by the University, in 2002.

Brian was a life-long plantsman, with a love and knowledge inherited from his father and expanded through his long-term membership of the Reading & District Natural History Society, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Brian also had a great love of music and he was an accomplished pianist. Until her premature death he was supported in all of his endeavours by Dr Julia Boorman, who was also a founder member of FORA and was our Chairman when she died in 2012.

Professor Brian Richard Kemp, born 25 March 1940, died 12 August 2019 aged 79.