

# Reading Abbey and the Forbury Major Surveys and Excavations

(Summary version)

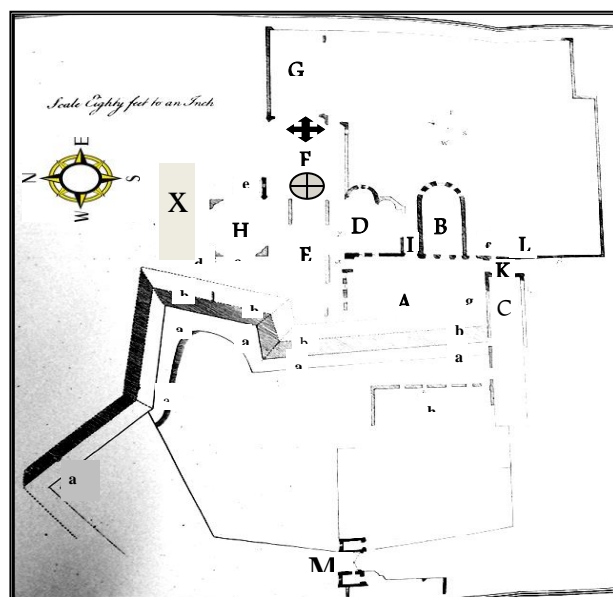
John Mullaney

The first, and in fact the only survey, of all the 1121 Reading Abbey buildings was undertaken by Sir Francis Englefield and published in 1779. Before this date we have Speed's 1610 map and one dating to the Civil war showing Reading's defences. Shortly after Englefield surveyed the area the first County Gaol was built over the eastern part of the Abbey, thereby making a full survey impossible.

NB North is to the left, see compass inset.

Key as produced by Sir Henry Englefield

- A** The Cloister court 148ft sqr
- B** The Chapter House 78 by 42
- C** The Refectory 72 by 38
- D** The South Transept of the church
- E** The Nave of the church
- F** The Choir of the church
- G** The eastern chapel of the church (the Lady Chapel)
- H** The North transept of the church
- I** A passage vaulted two stories (sic)
- K** A passage vaulted
- L** A wall once enclosing two rooms
- M** The great gate (the Abbey Gateway)



- a** The top of the rampart thrown up in the civil wars, which crosses the cloister.
- b** The ditch of the rampart.
- c** The spot where the mine was sprung.
- d** The leaning masses of wall.
- e** A small house built by the late Lord Fane.
- f** The remains of a stair-case.
- g** The lavatory.
- h** Probable situation of the dormitory.



Approximate site of the Abbey's



Possible site of the tomb of Henry I



Site of St James' Church

These three symbols and site of St James' church added by J Mullaney 2014

In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century three more maps were produced. These were by Charles Coates (1802), John Man (1813 and 1816) and C A Buckler (c. 1823-4). The first two mainly reported and repeated Englefield's work, whilst the last concentrated on the chancel area of the Abbey church and the conventual buildings to its south.

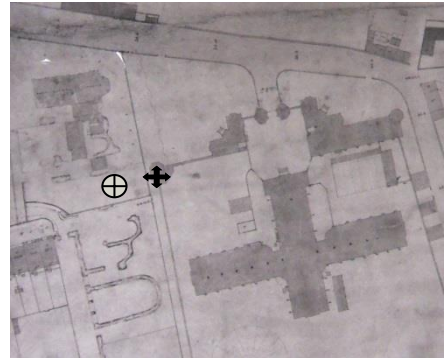
By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Forbury was beginning to be developed: St James' church, designed by AWN Pugin, was completed in 1840 and Abbots Walk, with its houses, was built shortly afterwards. There was a move to improve the

Forbury, especially the section to the east of the Hill and convert it into botanical gardens.

In 1853, as part of the overall improvements to the town, The Board of Health produced a detailed map. Although the copies are not in good condition they are useful for us today in seeing what the Abbey area was like before the improvements of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century



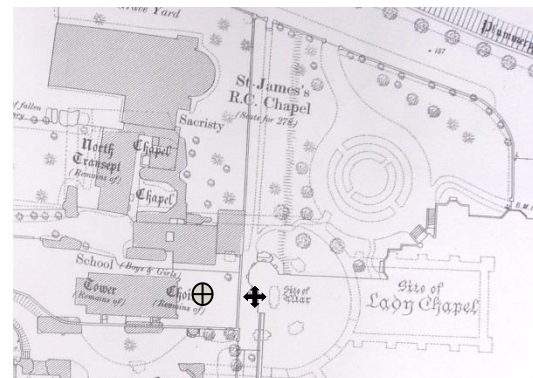
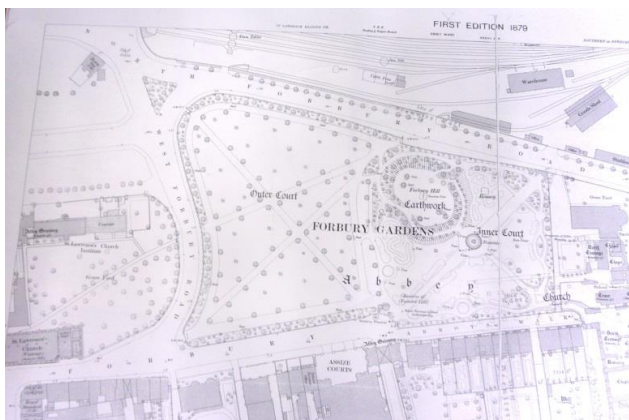
- ⊕ Possible site of the tomb of Henry I
- ⊕ Approximate site of the Abbey's high altar



According to Okey Taylor excavations were undertaken in 1857 and the whole area was dug to a depth of between 2 to 5 feet. The soil was moved to create the embankment of the Kennet where Chestnut Walk lies today.

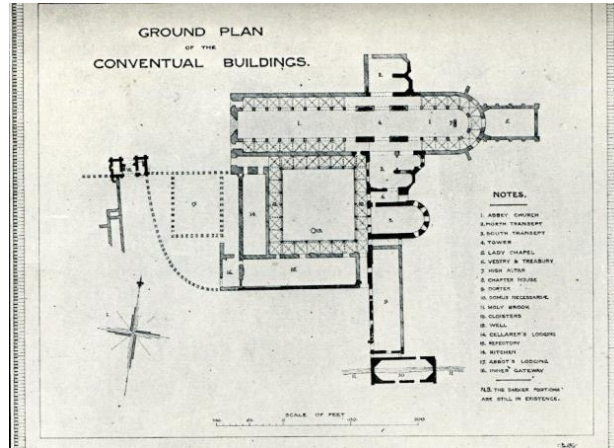
In 1867 a certain John Mellor excavated the Forbury but according to Cecil Slade, writing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, nothing of importance was uncovered.

By 1879 Ordnance Survey compiled a comprehensive map of the area. F W Albury claimed he had conducted a survey of the area and the OS used his findings for their map of the Forbury. This shows the outline of the Abbey as it is often presented today. The plan was repeated by Dr J Hurry in his works about the Abbey in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

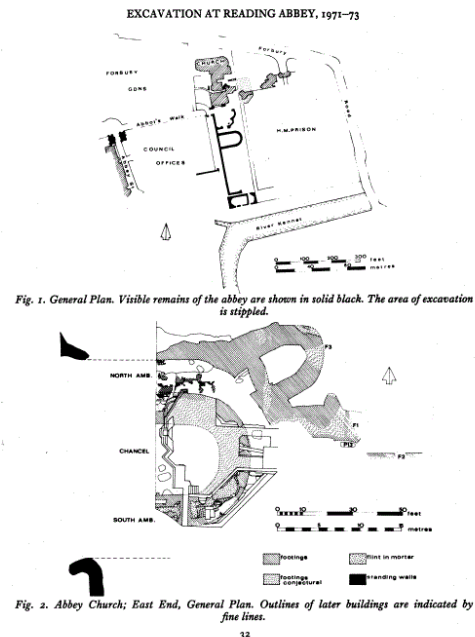


- ⊕ Possible site of the tomb of Henry I
- ⊕ Approximate site of the Abbey's high altar. Note that the altar on the OS map is marked further to the east. In fact it could well have been much further to the west

Hurry's plan



We have to move forward to the 1970s when Cecil Slade supervised the archaeological excavations in the prison car park, just east of its boundary with St James' school. This was the area of the chancel and so near to the likely position of the high altar. Medieval records claim that Henry I was buried in front of this altar. It was also near this position that the Reading Abbey Stone, now the font in St James' church, was discovered, carefully buried in line with the high altar. Slade dug to a depth of 10feet (3metres), uncovering some footings of the apse of the Abbey chancel.



Slade's 1970s excavation

In 2008 Wessex Archaeology published the results of a survey of the Abbey area, including all the Forbury. This uncovered various pieces of archaeology dating back to the Middle Ages but nothing of the Abbey was discovered.



A fuller account of all maps, surveys and excavations is available on request.