

## FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 25 OCTOBER 2014

### SECRETARY'S REPORT 2013-14

Last year started on a downbeat, following the sudden and untimely death of our former Secretary, John Bolton, in the summer of 2013. The Committee, however, had already committed itself to developing a proactive action plan for the new year, focused on supporting the Abbey Quarter Heritage Lottery Bid, due to be submitted by the Council in February 2014; and the Chairman's challenge, at last year's AGM, to double the number of Friends' members by the next AGM (today).

The new Committee, at its first meeting, agreed four key themes:

- 1) Working in partnership with the Council's Abbey Quarter Project Team to submit a successful lottery bid, and to open up the Abbey Ruins on more occasions during the year;
- 2) Promoting the Friends and the Abbey Ruins, and overhauling and updating the Friends' website;
- 3) Improving communication with our membership and partnership links;
- 4) Recruiting more members.

These key themes were focused on a basic mission – to get the Abbey Ruins and Gate conserved and re-opened to the public on a regular basis by 2012 – the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abbey's foundation.

#### Abbey Quarter Project

The Project is called *Reading Abbey Revealed*. The Council submitted the bid on 24 February 2014, following a web-based public consultation exercise which attracted 1,800 responses in total, the most successful consultation run by the Council. The Friends made a formal submission of support; we also actively promoted the consultation process and encouraged members to respond and circulate more widely; the Council invited our comments on the draft bid document.

As part of preparing the ground for the bid, the Council adopted a heritage statement, to which the Friends responded positively.

We are delighted that this time the Council's bid was successful, and the Project has now moved onto stage 2. The Project Team is working on a timetable to submit the crucial second bid by September 2015, supported by Hampshire County Council Architectural Services. The bid will be for £1.7M funding towards a total cost of £3.1M, with the Council meeting the remainder. It will conserve the Abbey Ruins and restore the Abbey Gateway roof.

The successful bid included a significant element of community engagement and voluntary support. We – the Friends – are important partners in the project, and the Council values our engagement. During 2014 both the Friends and the Council were keen to take opportunities to open up the Abbey Ruins to the public, under safety-controlled (hard hat) conditions. We did this on four occasions – a Friday in May, the Waterfest Saturday on 21 June, and on the Friday and Saturday of the Heritage open days weekend in September. On each occasion volunteers from the Friends worked with staff from the Museum to run escorted tours, thereby doubling the number of tours and therefore the number of visitors. In total, this facilitated over 400 visits to the Ruins, including 200 on the Waterfest Saturday. This was a very good response. Next year we aim not only to continue but to increase the number of openings, possibly linked to key dates in the Abbey's history. But to do this we need more volunteers to be trained to help.

On a related issue, the Friends wrote formally to the Council to set out our views on the opportunity offered by the Government's decision to close Reading gaol.

#### Promotion

At our first meeting, in November last year, the new Committee sketched out an action plan for the new year, with four main elements:

- Updating and re-issuing the Friends' leaflet
- Producing a new leaflet for a tour of Reading's Abbey Quarter - to get you as near to key locations as possible
- Refreshing the Friends' website
- Having a stand at the Waterfest, and again at the Friends' Annual Garden Party.

All have been done. The updated leaflet is available. Copies have been put on display in the Museum, the Central Library, the Civic Offices, and The Hexagon. The Museum has put them on display next to the model of the Abbey Ruins, where they have been very popular. It has gone into a second print.

The Reading Abbey Tour leaflet is also available today. It too is on display at the Museum. It is featured on the Friends website, where there is an accompanying map which can be downloaded. It has attracted the interest of [www.ramblr.com](http://www.ramblr.com), a local body who are keen to develop it as an App for mobile phones.

We took the opportunity to give out both leaflets to people taking part in all of the Abbey Ruins open days.

The website has been overhauled. Old links have been removed and the images updated; an Abbey timeline has been added; the site navigation is being changed to separate the Abbey and Friends' content; the colour scheme is under review. This is still work in progress, and very much an ongoing objective of the Committee.

We shared the Reading Museum stand at the Waterfest, where we were active in giving out both leaflets. We also purchased our own gazebo – or display tent – which we first put to use at the Friends' annual garden party at Caversham Court to house our own display.

#### Communication and Partnerships

We again joined with the other two Friends groups – for Reading Museum, and for Caversham Court Gardens - for a summer party on Sunday 22 June 2014. The weather was good, and the afternoon was a success – not least because it offered the opportunity to announce the success of the first stage of the heritage lottery bid.

The importance of our partnership with the Abbey Quarter project team this will continue as the Council works to submit the second – and final – stage of the bid next summer. We will work actively with them to help continue the success of the bid, and to get the Abbey Ruins reopened to the public by 2021.

Over the year, we have grown our relationship with St James's RC church, which occupies an important site on the north transept of the Abbey, and where parts of the Abbey Ruins can be seen, as well as a capital which is now used as the church font. We have shared both of our leaflets with the Church. We are keen to continue to develop this important link, both with the church and with the wider Catholic community in Reading who, in the past, held Corpus Christi services in the Abbey Ruins when open. Next year's Spring lecture will be given by John Mullaney, the local historian and author, whose new illustrated book, *Reading's Abbey Quarter*, will be released next week.

We are looking to develop new partnerships with local companies based in the Abbey Quarter, and with the Reading Abbey Rotary Club.

#### Membership

A last year's AGM, when our Chairman set the target of doubling our membership, we had a membership of 70. We now have a membership of 135. Due to natural turnover, 10 of last year's membership have fallen by the wayside. Therefore over the past year we have recruited 75 new members – and so met the challenge. This positive result has been due to a number of things, including our more active communication and promotion, and the high profile given to the Abbey Ruins by the Council's heritage bid and consultation.

We have also worked to improve our communication with our members. We have continued to issue three newsletters a year, which are posted to members who are not contactable by email. In addition, for the majority of members who can be contacted electronically, I have also been circulating monthly updates, initially to encourage responses to the Council's consultation, but then to promote Friends' events. This has generated feedback – and therefore a two-way communication with members.

We have continued the normal programme of events for members.

- Our spring lecture this year was by our President, Professor Brian Kemp, on Reading Abbey's Royal Connections. It was given in the Wroughton Room at the Berkshire Record Office, with a good and receptive audience
- Our autumn outing was to Winchester, in September, where 15 of us had guided tours of the Cathedral, Winchester College and St Cross Hospital (where we also had tea).
- Today's meeting will be followed by a talk by Professor George Bernard, from the University of Southampton, on the Dissolution of her Monasteries.

In conclusion, it has been a successful year, and we are well placed to look forward to 2015 and good news on Phase 2 of the Heritage Lottery bid.

John Painter  
Secretary  
October 2014