

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 24 OCTOBER 2015

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2014-15

Last year started on a very positive note, with Professor George Bernard's address to the 2014 AGM on the Dissolution of the Monasteries, which was attended by over 60 people. This set the tone for an active year which has seen a continuing growth in the membership, which now exceeds 200; the upgrading of our website; the establishment of a Facebook page; and a successful annual outing. We have also continued to work positively in partnership with Reading Borough Council on the Abbey Quarter Heritage Lottery Bid, which the Council submitted in September 2015 with the result to be known in January 2016.

During 2014-15 the Committee has co-opted one new member, Heather Young, who has been active in helping to set up our Facebook page and to expose us to the challenges of social media of the Twenty-first century. Alongside this, Doug Beaumont, our web-master, has overhauled our website and continues to work to improve its presentation and content. Both are worth a look.

The Committee has continued to work to the four key themes which it agreed in 2013:

- 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 are focused on a basic mission – to get the Abbey Ruins and Gate conserved and re-opened to the public on a regular basis by 2021 – the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation.

Abbey Quarter Project

The Project is called *Reading Abbey Revealed*. The Council submitted the phase 2 bid in early September 2015, following a second web-based public consultation exercise in January 2015 which attracted 1,200 responses in total. This, alongside the earlier 2014 consultation (which attracted 1,800 responses), makes this project the subject of the most successful consultations run by the Council. The Friends actively promoted the consultation process and encouraged members to respond and circulate more widely.

The bid is for £1.7M funding towards a total cost of £3.1M, with the Council meeting the remainder. It will restore the Abbey Gateway roof and conserve the Abbey Ruins, to allow regular public access. It has been developed for the Council by Hampshire County Council Architectural Services. The process included the development of an activity plan by Julia Holberry Associates, an independent consultancy, in which the Friends took part.

A successful bid must include 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 2015 the Friends continued to work with the Council to open up the Abbey Ruins to the public, under safety-controlled (hard hat) conditions. We did this on three occasions – the Waterfest Saturday on 20 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, with every tour fully booked. We have been able to provide this level of support through our pool of trained volunteers, to which three more have been recruited this year, to give a total of 12.

On a related matter, the Friends have also been involved in the Hidden Abbey project, which attracted national attention earlier in the year. This is a proposal by Philippa Langley MBE, working in conjunction with Darlow Smithson Productions, to undertake and film exploratory studies, using Ground-Penetrating

radar (GPS) to reveal the buried foundations of the Abbey church and possibly locate the burial vault of Henry I. Ms Langley is talking to the three owners of the land covering the Abbey church:– the Borough Council (Forbury Gardens), the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth (St James's church and associated buildings) and the Ministry of Justice (Reading gaol).

Promotion

As mentioned above, we have continued to update our website, including reviewing the front page, colour scheme, use of logos and images, and the programme of events page. This is still work in progress. For the first nine months of 2015, the website had 7,063 hits, from an average of 468 individuals a month. This compares very positively with 2014 where, over the whole year, we had 6,718 hits from an average of 280 individuals a month.

In June 2015 we also set up a Facebook page, which is promoted through the website. Both this and the website have featured photographic images of our activities over the year, including Waterfest, the Friends' Garden party, and our annual outing, to Oxford.

We have had both our leaflets re-printed during the year. These are our membership leaflet; and also our walking tour of the Abbey Quarter. We also shared the Reading Museum stand at the Waterfest, where we were active in giving out both leaflets.

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 21 June 2015. The weather was good, and the afternoon was again a success. As in 2014, we made good use of our gazebo (display tent) to house our own display, which this year included new display boards and updated material.

We have continued to develop 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. Our 2015 Spring lecture was given in St James's Church by John Mullaney, the local historian and author, whose new illustrated book , *Reading's Abbey Quarter*, was released the following week.

During the year I have given two illustrated talks to local community groups on Reading Abbey; and the Treasurer and I have given one guided tour of the Abbey Quarter, to the Maidenhead U3A group.

Membership

At our 2013 AGM, when our Chairman set the target of doubling our membership, we had a membership of 70. We achieved this, and in October 2014 we had a membership of 135. Our membership has continued to grow, and now stands at over 200. This is in no little part due to the higher public profile of Reading Abbey generated by both the Council's Reading Abbey Revealed consultation and Heritage Lottery bid, and the wider national interest of the Hidden Abbey project. The public consultation has demonstrated not only a high level of public interest in the Abbey Quarter, but also a great love amongst older Reading residents for the Abbey Ruins, and a strong level of support for their re-opening, following conservation. If the Heritage Lottery bid is successful, this should be achieved by 2018.

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 continued to circulate monthly updates, which both promote Friends' events, and also share information and news on local initiatives affecting the Abbey quarter. This year's communications therefore have provided regular updates on the high-quality restoration of the St Laurence churchyard wall – a good news story by the Council, after 25 years of the wall being propped up by scaffolding; the unveiling of the Trooper Potts VC statue in The Forbury; and the less positive news of the Ministry of Justice's inactivity to dispose of Reading gaol. This exercise has generated feedback – and therefore a two-way communication with members.

We have continued the normal programme of events for members.

- As mentioned above, our spring lecture this year was by local historian John Mullaney, on Reading Abbey and Catholicism, to a good and receptive audience
- Our Summer outing was to Oxford, on 8 July 2015, where we had guided visits to three colleges with direct links to Reading Abbey. These were Merton College, where the land was sold to the college by the Abbey in the C13th, and we saw the original deed of transfer in the College archive; Magdalen College, who say that the linen-roll panelling in the College refectory may have come from Reading Abbey in the C16th, following dissolution; and Balliol College archive, where we saw a charter from Abbot Nicholas of Whaplode making a grant towards building of the college chapel. Our President, Prof. Brian Kemp, also treated us to a guided tour of St Frideswide's Cathedral in Christ Church. Nearly 30 members came on the outing.
- Today's meeting will be followed by the Annual Lecture which this year is by Harriet Mahood, a post-graduate student at the University of Reading, on Medieval Monastic and Ecclesiastical Gatehouses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been another successful year, and we are well placed to look forward to 2016 and good news on Phase 2 of the Heritage Lottery bid.

Constitutional Matters

Item 9 of today's agenda makes two proposals to change the constitution. Below I provide some background.

1) To increase the number of ordinary members on the committee from four to five

Para. 4 of the constitution specifies that the Committee shall comprise the Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, and four Committee members in addition to the officers. Under Para. 8, the Committee may co-opt up to two members from the membership of the Friends.

At last year's AGM, three members were appointed to the Committee, leaving one vacancy. During the year, the committee used its powers under para. 8 to co-opt Heather Young.

Given the increasing membership of the Friends, and its own growing activity, the Committee has taken the view that its membership could usefully be increased by one person (to give a total committee of eight members), with a particular reference to enhancing the PR and marketing skills available to the Friends. Therefore Para 4(f) should be re-written as follows:

"(f) The committee shall comprise the Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, and five committee members in addition to these officers".

2) To amend the rule relating to the Chairman's casting vote

Para. 4 of the constitution says that the forum for each committee meeting shall be four members. Para. 7 says that the Chairman shall not vote, except to exercise a casting vote in the event of a tied vote.

This is an incorrect application of the concept of a tied vote, which is conventionally (and in law) a second vote which the Chairman can exercise to resolve a tied vote. Therefore para. 7 should be re-written as follows:

"The Chairman may exercise a second, casting vote in the event of a tied vote"