

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 29 OCTOBER 2016

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2015-16

Last year started on a positive note, with Harriet Mahood's address to the 2015 AGM on Medieval Monastic and Ecclesiastical Gatehouses, which was attended by over 50 people. This set the tone for an active year which has seen a continuing growth in the membership; the continued upgrading of our website; a successful Spring meeting held at St Laurence's church; and a successful annual summer outing. We have also continued to work positively in partnership with Reading Borough Council on the Reading Abbey Revealed Project, following the success of the Council's Heritage Lottery Bid; and with the Council and other landowner partners on the Hidden Abbey Project, which funded Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) mapping of the Abbey church in June 2016.

During 2016-16 the Committee has co-opted one new member, Bill Hicks.

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;
- 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 success of the Heritage Lottery Bid was announced in December 2015. It has provided £1.7M funding towards a total cost of £3.1M, with the Council meeting the remainder. The Project 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 during 2015. Work above ground will start early in 2017, with an expected completion date late in 2018.

The Project will 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 2016 the Friends continued to work with the Council to open up the Abbey Ruins to the public, under safety-controlled (hard hat) conditions, on the Friday and Saturday of the Heritage open days' weekend in September. We also promoted the Project through our stall in Chestnut Walk, on the Waterfest Saturday (11 June); and through the Friends' summer party, which this year was held in the Forbury Gardens, on Sunday 19 June, with the specific theme of promoting the Council's successful bid and the Reading Abbey Revealed Project.

In these activities, we have been able to provide this level of support both through the personal commitment of the committee and through our pool of trained volunteers, to which three more have been recruited this year, to give a total of 12.

As mentioned above, the Friends have also been involved in the Hidden Abbey project, which attracted local, national and international attention in June year. Where Reading Abbey Revealed is about the Abbey ruins above ground, the Hidden Abbey Project is about the Abbey below ground. Stratascan Sumo were commissioned to do GPR mapping to identify the buried foundations of the Abbey church and possibly locate the burial vault of Henry I, by the 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

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. For the first nine months of 2016, the website had 8,750 hits, from an average of 596 individuals a month. This compares very positively with 2015, where we had 7,063 hits from an average of 468 individuals a month.

From June 2016 onwards we have had over 1,000 hits each month (1,631 in July), which suggests that the publicity generated by the Hidden Abbey Project, and also FORA's own local activities, might have had an impact.

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 Lewes.

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. This year we had our own stand at the Waterfest, where we were active in giving out both leaflets, as we were at the summer party in the Forbury Gardens.

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 19 June 2016. The weather was good, and the afternoon was again a success. As in 2015, we made good use of our gazebo (display tent) to house our own display, which this year we supplemented by a second gazebo, which was occupied by the sound technician.

As part of the summer garden party we worked with St James church, and with Prof. David Owen Norris at the University of Southampton, for an afternoon of rehearsals and talk about *Sumer is Icumen in*, the Reading round first recorded by the Abbey monks in the C13th, which was then sung in public on the Forbury Gardens mound to end the afternoon's activities. Around 80 people were involved in the singing, with an equivalent number of spectators. The event was subsequently featured in the BBC Music Magazine.

During the year I have given four illustrated talks to local community groups on Reading Abbey, in return for contributions to FORA's funds.

Membership

At our 2013 AGM, when our Chairman set the target of doubling our membership, we had a membership of 70. In October 2014 we had a membership of 135. Our membership has continued to grow, and now stands at over 220. This is in no little part due to the higher public profile of Reading Abbey generated by both the Council's Reading Abbey Revealed project and the wider national interest of the Hidden Abbey project. The public consultation in 2015 on the former demonstrated a high level of public interest in the Abbey Quarter, and also a great love amongst older Reading residents for the Abbey Ruins, and a strong level of support for their re-opening, following conservation.

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 circulated monthly updates, which both promote Friends' events, and also share information and news on local initiatives affecting the Abbey quarter. This year's communications have provided regular updates on the Ministry of Justice's plans to put Reading gaol on the market in the new year, and the very positive ArtAngel promotion of the gaol over the autumn. This exercise 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, on 15 April, was by Dr Martin Heale, from the University of Liverpool, on the Abbot in late Medieval and Reformation England. This was held in St Laurence church, which we booked with the specific objective of opening up the church, originally founded by the Abbey for local worship, again to local people 900 years later. It was well attended, by around 80 members.
- Our Summer outing was to Lewes, on 6 July 2016, where we were given a guided visit to the earlier Cluniac foundation by the Friends of Lewes Priory. We also visited Anne of Cleves' House and Museum; the church of St John the Baptist, Southover, which now houses the grave slab of Gundrada, the wife of the Priory founder; and Clayton church, with mural paintings commissioned by the monks. 25 members came on the outing.
- Today's meeting will be followed by the Annual Lecture which this year is by Ron Baxter, the art historian and Director of the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland, based at King's College London, and the author this year of the new book on Reading Abbey, *The Royal Abbey of Reading*, which is the subject of today's Lecture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been another successful year, and we are well placed to look forward to 2017 and the start of work on the ground on the Reading Abbey Revealed project.

John Painter
Secretary October 2016