

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 28 OCTOBER 2017

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2016-17

Last year started on a positive note, with Dr Ron Baxter's address to the 2016 AGM on *The Royal Abbey of Reading*, 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 and Facebook page; a second 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.

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 Council's successful Heritage Lottery Bid has provided £1.7M funding towards a total cost of £3.1M, with the Council meeting the remainder. The Project is restoring the Abbey Gateway roof and conserving the Abbey Ruins, to allow regular public access. The contract for the conservation works was awarded to CRL Restoration in January 2017, who have appointed Cliveden Conservation as their specialist sub-contractors. Work started on site in February. They are making good progress, and the expected completion date is summer 2018. Key elements of the conservation programme are re-pointing existing masonry with hot-mixed lime mortar; restoring fallen flints where possible and necessary; and capping the tops of the walls with sedum to prevent water penetration.

The Project has been accompanied by an exciting events programme at Reading Museum, including the Reading Abbey Then and Now exhibition in the Madejski Gallery; the Reading Abbey on Wheels mobile exhibition; monthly conservation tours of the Abbey Ruins; and the monthly Tea and Talks at Two programme of public lectures. The exhibition ended in September 2017, but the rest will continue. A major launch programme for the re-opened Abbey is planned for next summer.

The Project includes a significant element of community engagement and voluntary support in which we – the Friends – are important partners, and the Council values our engagement. We have been able to provide support both through the personal commitment of the committee and our pool of trained volunteers, which now stands at 12.

The Friends have also continued to be involved in the Hidden Abbey project, which attracted local, national and international attention in June 2016 when it commissioned GPR mapping of the Abbey church. Where Reading Abbey Revealed is about the Abbey ruins above ground, the Hidden Abbey Project is about the Abbey below ground. The project is supported 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 and re-ordering the content to provide clearer and separate focuses on the Friends, and on Reading Abbey events. The website is a valuable source of information on the Abbey. For the first nine months of 2017, the website had 8,800 hits, from an average of 694 individuals a month. This is an improvement on the same period in 2016, when we had 8,750 hits, from an average of 596 individuals a month. Four of the nine months attracted over 1,000 hits.

Our Facebook page, set up in 2015, continues to attract interest, with regular followers increasing from 100 in 2016, to 122 currently in 2017. Followers in turn can share posts across their Facebook contacts. The numbers peak when social media is involved; for instance, over 600 people were reached in November 2016 when we featured the Reading Between the Lines production of Henry I. The talk provided by the Reading Branch of Historical Association Reading on Reading Abbey - Abbey

Saints, Miracles and Cure-seekers reached similar numbers. In August 2017, our post promoting Heritage Open Day talks at St James' church reached over 250 people. Total numbers reached from September 2016 to September 2017 are a very creditable 6,600.

Both sites also actively promote Reading Abbey and activities associated with it, including progress on the conservation works and the promotion of the Reading Abbey Revealed events programme.

We have had our membership leaflet re-printed during the year. We also have our walking tour of the Abbey Quarter leaflet. Both are on display at Reading Museum, in the Reading Abbey display area.

Communication and Partnerships

We joined with the other two Friends groups – for Reading Museum, and for Caversham Court Gardens – to have a promotional stall at this year's Reading Waterfest on 10 June 2017, based in our gazebo, which was also supported by staff from the Reading Abbey Revealed team. The three Friends groups did not hold a summer party this year.

During the year we have given four illustrated talks to local community groups on Reading Abbey, and run three guided tours of the Abbey Quarter, 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 229 (including family members). We recruited 33 new members during 2016-17, as against 15 members who did not re-subscribe. This is in no little part due to the higher public profile of Reading Abbey generated by the Council's Reading Abbey Revealed project, where the public consultation in 2015 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 Reading Abbey Revealed project and the associated programme of events at Reading Museum. In December 2016 we were also involved in the Light Up Reading programme, where we supported Reading College students who produced a 3D project allowing people to take a virtual tour of Reading Abbey, which was displayed in Town Hall Square as part of the culmination of Reading's 2016 Year of Culture.

We have continued the normal programme of events for members.

- Our spring lecture this year, on 31 March, was by Joan Dils on *St Laurence Parish and Reading Abbey: Years of Crisis c1520-c1570*. Appropriately this was held in St Laurence church, and was well attended, by around 70 members.
- Our summer outing had a Jane Austen theme, to recognise the 200th anniversary of her death. It was to Steventon church and Chawton, on 4 July 2017, where we were given a guided visit to Chawton House Library. We also visited the Jane Austen House Museum. 36 members came on the outing.
- Today's meeting will be followed by the Annual Lecture which this year is on the progress of the Reading Abbey Revealed Project, given by Matthew Williams, Reading Museum Manager, and Giles Pritchard, Design Manager, Heritage Architecture, Hampshire County Council.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been another successful year, and we are well placed to look forward to 2018 and the completion of work on the ground on the Reading Abbey Revealed project and the celebration of the re-opening of the Abbey Ruins to the public, after 9 years.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2017