

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 27 OCTOBER 2018

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2017-18

Last year started on a very positive note, with an address to the 2017 AGM on *The Reading Abbey Revealed Project* by Matthew Williams, Reading Museum Manager and Reading Abbey Revealed Project Manager, and Giles Pritchard, Design Manager, Heritage Architecture, Hampshire County Council, which was attended by over 75 people. This set the tone for an active year which has seen a continuing growth in the membership; the maturing of our website and Facebook page; a third successful Spring meeting held at St Laurence's church; and another successful annual summer outing. We have also continued to work positively in partnership with Reading Borough Council on the Reading Abbey Revealed Project, which was completed on time and to budget, with the Abbey Gateway opening to the public on 14 April 2018, and the newly-conserved Abbey Ruins re-opening with great public interest on 16 June 2018. What an excellent job Reading Borough Council has done, and what a wonderful asset we now have in the remains of Reading Abbey.

In the light of the conservation and re-opening of the Abbey Ruins to the public, the Committee has revised the four key themes which it adopted in 2013, to read as follows:

1. Working in partnership with Reading Museum to support the successful implementation of the Reading Abbey Revealed Project and the ongoing promotion and maintenance of the Abbey Ruins and Gate.
2. Maintaining good communication with our members and partnership links, and promoting the Friends and Abbey Quarter through proactive and up-to-date website and facebook pages.
3. Recruiting more members and retaining current members – with a target of 250 by 2018 AGM
4. Planning for a high-profile celebration of the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation, in 2021.

These key themes are now focused on looking forward to celebrating the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation, in June 2021.

Abbey Ruins Re-opening

The *Reading Abbey Revealed Project* has spent £3.1M – with £1.7M from Heritage Lottery funding, and the Council meeting the remainder – on restoring the Abbey Gateway roof and conserving the Abbey Ruins, to allow regular public access. The conservation works were overseen by CRL Restoration who appointed Cliveden Conservation as their specialist sub-contractors. Work started on site in February 2017 and was completed by June 2018. Key elements of the conservation programme involved 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 was accompanied by an exciting events programme at Reading Museum during 2017-18, with a major launch programme for the re-opened Abbey run over the spring and summer. Since re-opening, the Abbey Ruins have hosted the return of the Progress Theatre's Shakespeare in the Ruins (in July), and a number of public events, culminating in the Reading-on-Thames Flamingods event and light installation in the Dormitory on 8 September 2018.

The Project included new and enhanced signage and interpretation boards, both within the Abbey Quarter and the town centre. There is a significant element of community engagement and voluntary support in the Project 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 16. More are needed. Since the re-opening, the FORA volunteers have cleaned the interpretation boards in the Abbey Quarter.

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 in partnership with 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, which now provides a clearer and separate focuses on the Friends, and on the large number of Reading Abbey events. The website is a valuable source of information on the Abbey. Over the summer of 2018 we have been averaging 531 hits a month, with over 700 in June 2018, when the Abbey Ruins re-opened.

Our Facebook page, set up in 2015, continues to attract interest, with regular followers increasing yearly from 122 in 2017 to 197 in 2018 (to date). Followers in turn can share posts across their Facebook contacts which also expands our profile. There

has been a healthy increase in the average number of people reached in 2018, which has risen to 141, compared with just 18 in 2017. The Facebook page is invaluable for advertising events such as our recent Summer Party and in August 2018 views peaked at 2,566. We can also post other Abbey-related events taking place in the area.

Both sites also actively promote Reading Abbey and activities associated with it, including the Reading Abbey Revealed events programme and other activities to celebrate the re-opening of the conserved Abbey Ruins and gate,

We have had our membership leaflet re-printed during the year. We have also produced a new illustrated guide to *Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter*, published by local publishers Two Rivers Press, in September 2018. We provided funding for this from a legacy which, together with a grant from the Earley Charity, helped keep the cost of the book at an accessible level of £9.99. We have also supported the publication of the latest volume (25) from the Berkshire Record Society of *Reading Abbey Records: a new miscellany*, translated from Latin by our President, Prof. Brian Kemp, with further funding from the legacy being used to make this available to for members at a discounted price.

Communication and Partnerships

We joined with the other two Friends groups – for Reading Museum, and for Caversham Court Gardens – to have a promotional stall in Chestnut Walk at this year's Reading Waterfest on 16 June 2018, based in our gazebos, which was also supported by staff from the Reading Abbey Revealed team. This coincided with the official re-opening of the Abbey Ruins.

The three Friends groups held a successful Summer Party in the Abbey Dormitory on Sunday 2 September 2018, which was very well attended, with refreshments provided by Ways & Means, and entertainment from the Pangbourne Silver Band, Shinfield Shambles Morris, and the Reading Rock Choir. There are lots of pictures on our Facebook page.

During the year we have given three illustrated talks to local community groups on Reading Abbey, and run six 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 280 (including family members). We recruited 26 new members during 2017-18, as against 11 members who did not re-subscribe; and a further 8 since 1 September. 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 twice-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 to support the re-opening programme.

We have continued the normal programme of events for members.

- Our spring lecture this year, on 13 April, was by Simon Marsh, from the Battlefields Trust, on *A Place Strongly Fortified – the Civil War Siege of Reading*. This was held in St Laurence church, and was well attended, by around 80 members.
- Our summer outing, on 25 July, was to Tewkesbury Abbey and Deerhurst Priory. 32 members came on the outing.
- Today's meeting will be followed by the Annual Lecture which this year is on *Magic, Medicine and Miracles in the Medieval Abbey*, given by Professor Anne Lawrence-Mathers, Professor of Medieval History at the University of Reading.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been another successful year, and we are well placed to look forward to 2019 and the continued celebration of the re-opening of the Abbey Ruins to the public, after 9 years, and the planning of further celebrations for the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation, in 2021.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2018