

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 26 OCTOBER 2019

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2018-19

The past year was saddened by the death of our President, Professor Brian Kemp, on 12 August 2019. Brian was one of the founder members of FORA, in 1984, and had a continuing commitment to us for the next 35 years, as Chairman and latterly as President. Brian was the acknowledged academic expert on Reading Abbey, locally and nationally, and his name was synonymous with the Abbey. He studied Reading Abbey for his PhD under Dr Cecil Slade, and published his guide to *Reading Abbey* in 1968, whilst also working on the Reading Abbey Cartularies, which he published as two volumes in 1986-7. His last work, *Reading Abbey Records: a new miscellany*, was published by the Berkshire Record Society (volume 25) in 2018, to coincide with the Abbey Ruins re-opening. Brian attended our spring and autumn public meetings up to this year's Spring Lecture, and inspired and led our annual outings up to 2018. The Committee propose that the annual spring Lecture should be named 'The Brian Kemp Lecture' in memory of Brian, starting in 2020.

Our 2018-19 year started on a very positive note, with an illustrated talk to the 2018 AGM by Professor Anne Lawrence-Mathers, Professor of Medieval History, University of Reading, on Magic, Medicine and Miracles in the Medieval Abbey. This was hosted by St James's Church, in the Abbey Quarter, and was attended by over 80 people.

This set the tone for an active year which has seen a consolidation of our membership; the maturing of our website and Facebook page; a fourth 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 to bed in the Reading Abbey Revealed Project, following the re-opening to the public of the Abbey Ruins on 16 June 2018, which we celebrated, in conjunction with the other Friends' Groups, by holding a summer party in the Abbey Dormitory on 2 September 2018, which was extremely well attended. What an excellent job Reading Borough Council has done, and what a wonderful asset we now have in the remains of Reading Abbey.

It is good to see that conservation work to the abbey remains in the St James's church precinct is currently being taken forward at the instigation of Historic England, to complete the conservation of all the ruins above ground and to enable HE to take Reading Abbey off the HE 'at risk' register.

In 2018 the Committee revised its four key themes, 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.
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: *Reading Abbey 900*.

Abbey Ruins Re-opening

The *Reading Abbey Revealed Project* spent £3.1M – with funding from the Heritage Lottery and the Council – on restoring the Abbey Gateway roof and conserving the Abbey Ruins, to allow regular public access. The Project included new and enhanced signage and interpretation boards, both within the Abbey Quarter and the town centre. There was a significant element of community engagement and voluntary support in the Project in which we – the Friends – were important partners. We provided support both through the personal commitment of the committee and our pool of trained volunteers.

Our contribution to the promotion and conservation of the Abbey Ruins was recognised through our successful nomination for the Cultural category of the 2018 Pride of Reading awards, sponsored by M & G Real Estate, which we were delighted to receive at the Royal Berkshire Conference Centre, at the Madejski Stadium, in November 2018.

Promotion

We have continued to update our website, which provides separate pages on the Friends, and on the large number of Reading Abbey events. The website is a valuable source of information on the Abbey. Between October 2018 and September 2019 we

averaged 378 hits a month, a little down on the summer of 2018, when the Abbey Ruins re-opened, when we were averaging 531 hits a month.

Our Facebook page, set up in 2015, continues to attract interest, with regular followers increasing yearly from 122 in 2017 to 218 in 2019 (to date). Followers in turn can share posts across their Facebook contacts which also expands our profile. There has been a small increase in the average number of people reached in 2019, which has risen to 152, compared with just 18 in 2017 and 141 in 2018. The Facebook page is invaluable for advertising events, and the posts advertising last year's AGM, the Spring Lecture and Abbey Tours 2019 received the highest views.

Both sites also actively promote Reading Abbey and activities associated with it, including the Reading Abbey events programme. They will be important in promoting the Reading Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021.

In September 2018 we produced a new illustrated guide to *Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter*, published by local publishers Two Rivers Press, which the Chairman and I have promoted at a number of events organised both at Reading Museum and the Reading branch of Waterstones. We provided funding for this (as did the Earley Charity) from a legacy which was also used to make the latest volume (25) from the Berkshire Record Society of *Reading Abbey Records: a new miscellany* 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 15 June 2019, based in our gazebos, where we invited public views on suggestions to celebrate Reading Abbey 900 in 2021.

All three Friends groups also had a presence at the First Sunday event at Caversham Court Gardens on 4 August 2019, along with a dog show and the Salvation Army band, and refreshments provided by Ways & Means, where we continued to canvass attendees on ideas for Reading Abbey 900. There are lots of pictures of both events on our Facebook page.

During the year we have given one illustrated talk to local community groups on Reading Abbey, and run five guided tours of the Abbey Quarter, in return for contributions to FORA's funds. We have also contributed to a Radio Berkshire Halloween item.

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 remains at over 280 (including family members). We recruited 25 new members during 2018-19, as against 9 members who did not re-subscribe.

We communicate regularly with our members. We 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 regular updates, which both promote Friends' events, and also share information and news on local initiatives affecting the Abbey quarter.

We have continued the normal programme of events for members.

- Our spring lecture this year, on 22 March, was by Joe Chick, from Warwick University, on *The Impact of the Dissolution of 1539 on the Town of Reading*. This was held in St Laurence church, and was well attended, by over 80 members.
- Our summer outing, on 24 July, was to Cholsey, Wallingford and Dorchester-on-Thames. 35 members came on the outing.
- Today's meeting will be followed by the Annual Lecture which this year is on *The Grey Friars in Reading*, given by Malcolm Summers, local historian, author and Friend.

Conclusion

It has been another successful year, where we have consolidated and built upon the interest generated by the re-opening of the Abbey Ruins and Gateway in 2018, and we are well placed to look forward to 2020 and the working with local partners to plan further celebrations for the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation, in 2021.