

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 25 OCTOBER 2020

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2019-20

Our 2019-20 year has been very disrupted by the national COVID-19 lockdown and continuing restrictions.

It started on a positive note, with an illustrated talk to the 2019 AGM by Malcolm Summers, local author and Friend, on the Grey Friars in Reading up to the dissolution of their friary in 1538. This was hosted at Greyfriars church and was attended by over 80 people.

We then had a programme of combined activities with the Friends of Reading Museum (FORM) over the winter, starting with a FORA presence at the national conference of the British Association of Friends of Museums, held at Reading Town Hall on 12 October 2019. This was followed by two visits to Douai Abbey, on 29/30 October, attended by 40 FORA and FORM members, where we were given a guided tour of the Abbey library and archive by Abbot Geoffrey Scott. In November, Committee members took part in the Sounds of Reading Abbey Project, organised at Reading Town Hall by Reading Abbey Revealed Outreach and involving presentations on Abbey-related themes by two local primary schools, Caversham Park and Geoffrey Field. The programme was due to conclude in March with a joint event in the Gateley Boardroom, on the top floor of The Blade, offering splendid views over the Abbey Ruins, which was cancelled at short notice as the Government introduced the national lockdown on the same day, 23 March 2020.

Sadly, our spring and summer programme of events had to be abandoned due to the lockdown. This would have been launched by our spring lecture, again at St Laurence's church, by Dr Adrian Ailes, on *The Heraldry of Reading Abbey and its Legacy*, as the inaugural Professor Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture, in memory of our late President who very sadly died in August 2019. Dr Ailes will now give his paper at the 2021 Spring Lecture, although given the continuing uncertainty about the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic into 2021, a date for this has not yet been confirmed.

We then had plans to have a joint presence with our Friends partners, the Friends of Reading Museum (FORM) and the Friends of Caversham Court Gardens, on Chestnut Walk during the 2020 Reading Waterfest, on Saturday 13 June; and at the Caversham Court Gardens Fun Dog Show, on Sunday 2 August. Both events were cancelled. So too was this year's Friends Summer Outing, which was proposed to visit St Bartholomew-the-Great church in Smithfield, St John's Clerkenwell, and the London Charterhouse.

Today's AGM was to have been followed by an Autumn Lecture by Dr Joanna Laynesmith, University of Reading Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies, on *Queen Elizabeth Woodville*. As with the Spring Lecture, this will now follow our 2021 AGM.

Despite the cancellation of our planned programme, we have not been inactive. We have sent out three Newsletters to keep members informed of any developments concerning the Abbey Quarter, and I have continued to send regular e-mail updates, two or three times a month. The principal development this year has been the Ministry of Justice's marketing and disposal of Reading Gaol for commercial and/or residential development, rather than accepting the Council's offer for historical and cultural purposes. FORA published a statement setting out its position on the Sale of Reading Gaol when the disposal decision was made, in April 2020. Other relevant developments have been the refurbishment of Chestnut Walk, including replacing the old and diseased chestnut trees by young healthy saplings, resurfacing the walk and installing street lighting; and very sadly the attack on members of the public enjoying a sunny summer afternoon in Forbury Gardens, on 20 June, which left three men dead and others injured.

We are delighted that the incoming Mayor of Reading for 2020-21, Councillor David Stevens, has chosen FORA as one of his three Mayoral charities for the year, and despite the ongoing restrictions we have been working with the Mayor and his office to develop a programme of YouTube Mayoral talks with local people on Abbey-related themes, with a focus on key events in the Abbey's annual calendar. These started in early October 2020 with local historian,

author and Friend, John Mullaney, talking to the Mayor about the Coronation of the Virgin stone, in the Museum's Abbey collection, to coincide with the re-opening of Reading Museum in September. More are planned, with local presenters, on a roughly monthly basis. We are also grateful to John Mullaney for his independent activities in promoting Abbey-related themes, including producing two YouTube videos, on the Coronation of the Virgin Stone, and the Chancel of Reading Abbey and the Burial of King Henry I, both of which develop themes in papers which are on the FORA website. In August, John published a new book, *A Tale of Two Towns*, telling the story of the people of Reading from the earliest times to the foundation of the Abbey in 1121; and later this year Lindsey Mullaney is bringing out her new book, on *Henry I*. Both are published by Scallop Shell Press. Our speaker last October, Malcolm Summers, has also recently brought out a new book, *Reading's Grey Friars*, which is available from Amazon.

One further lockdown project was the publication, through the website, of *Monks and Monasticism*, the notes prepared by Professor Brian Kemp for a day school at Douai Abbey in October 2000. This was done in memory of Brian, and in place of the postponed Spring Lecture.

During the year, and despite the lockdown, we have given illustrated talks about the Abbey to three local groups, with three more in the pipeline; and one guided walk of the Abbey Quarter (again with more planned).

The lack of activity in 2020, due to the lockdown has resulted in a squeeze on our membership, which now stands at 241, with only six new members joining this year, some 4 more not renewing their subscription and a further 30 subscriptions still unpaid. This is understandable, but disappointing, and the committee are working on plans to raise FORA's profile again in 2021, as we celebrate Reading Abbey 900: the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation, on 18 June 1121. This will be the focus of our activities during 2021, but with a specific focus at next June's Reading Waterfest.

We have continued to update our website, which provides separate pages on the Friends, and on Reading Abbey events. The website is a valuable source of information on the Abbey, as is our Facebook page, set up in 2015. Both sites 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. As part of this we are developing Reading Abbey 900 walking routes, accessible from the website.

Due to national events, we cannot describe 2020 as a successful year, but we have continued to work with Reading Museum and Reading Abbey Revealed to promote awareness of and interest in Reading Abbey, and to plan for the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation, in 2021. Next year promises to be an important and significant milestone, and we value the continued support of our members as we look forward to it.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2020