

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 30 OCTOBER 2021

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2020-21

2021 is the 900th anniversary of the foundation of Reading Abbey, on 18 June 1121, and Reading Abbey 900 has been the focus of our activities over the past year. As in 2020, they have been restricted and limited by the national COVID-19 lockdowns and Government restrictions. However, Reading Borough Council rose to the occasion by holding the Reading Water Fest as a public live event on Saturday 19 June and committing it to celebrate the Abbey's foundation, an event in which FORA was an active player.

Today's AGM meeting and the Autumn Lecture that follows it are our first scheduled public meetings since the first lockdown started in March 2020. Last October our 2020 AGM was our first meeting to be held virtually, on Zoom, and the planned Autumn Lecture was postponed until this year (and will follow today's meeting). Nevertheless it was attended by 30 members, conducted the business of the meeting, and elected the new committee and officers for 2020-21, who have continued to meet electronically via Zoom throughout the year.

Encouraged by the success of the Zoom AGM, the Committee set up a programme of illustrated Zoom winter talks, given by members on topics of interest related to the Abbey. Four were given, between December 2020 and May 2021, each of which attracted healthy audiences of between 35 and 70. The first was by Lindsay Mullaney, on the Hand of St James; this was followed, in January, by Malcolm Summers, talking on Dr Jamieson Hurry; Graham Horn in April on the Kennet & Avon Canal; and Dr Joe Chick in May on Reading local politics in the late Fifteenth Century. These talks were important in providing events for members during the second COVID lockdown of last winter, and showing that FORA was active and engaged.

During the dark days of last winter's lockdown, local author and historian John Mullaney posted four videos on Reading Abbey themes on YouTube, all of which can be accessed from the FORA website. These were on Coronation of Virgin stone (on display in Reading Museum); the Abbey chancel and burial place of Henry I; the Abbey's central tower, design and height; and the Chapter House. John's work is an important contribution to the growing body of study about Reading Abbey.

The sense of activity was also encouraged by the Mayor of Reading in 2020-21, Councillor David Stevens, who was eager to support and promote Reading Abbey 900. We were delighted that he chose FORA as one of his Mayoral charities. Unfortunately, the COVID Regulations seriously restricted the Mayor in his public engagements between the autumn of 2020 and spring of 2021. At his suggestion, we worked with him to set up a series of video talks on themes linked to Reading Abbey, which the Council has published on YouTube, and which can be accessed easily through the FORA website. In total the Mayor hosted six filmed talks, covering the Coronation of the Virgin stone (John Mullaney – local author and historian); Reading's Royal Abbey (John Painter, FORA); King Henry I (Lindsay Mullaney, local author and historian); Reading Abbey's impact on the small town of Reading (Matthew Williams, Reading Museum); the Reformation and Dissolution (the Bishop of Fulham); and finally, a filmed walk around the Abbey Ruins with Dr Peter Durrant, our chairman. The Mayor held, in May, a virtual auction for his charities, which raised funds for FORA, for which we are most grateful.

On Saturday 27 March 2021 we held the first Professor Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture, postponed from 2020. This was our regular Spring Lecture, now dedicated to the memory of our late President and co-founder, who had died in August 2019 aged 79. The illustrated Lecture was given, on Zoom, by Dr Adrian Ailes, on *The Heraldry of Reading Abbey*, and was viewed by up to 90 people. Dr Ailes had been Brian's first post-graduate research student at the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Reading, in the 1970s.

The Spring Lecture launched FORA's programme of events to celebrate Reading Abbey 900, the nonocentenary of the Abbey's foundation on 18 June 1121. Due to the COVID restrictions this was more limited than originally envisaged, but Reading Borough Council, Living Reading (Reading UK CIC), the University of Reading, the Co-Fraternity of St James, and others, all made proactive contributions to the celebrations. Living Reading started the year with the issue of a promotional video, which can be accessed from the FORA website. As mentioned above, Reading Council committed to hold a live 2021 Reading Water Fest, on Saturday 19 June, with free public events, activities and music taking place in the Forbury Gardens, Abbey Ruins and Chestnut Walk, under COVID-controlled conditions, and with attendance booked in advance to control numbers. In total 4,000 people attended the day. The focus of the day was Reading Abbey 900, and the day was started by the formal unveiling of a new sculpted head to include in the Abbey Gateway which, following a local competition, was the head of the last Abbot, Hugh Cook Faringdon.

FORA, along with other heritage groups, had a stand in the South Transept of the Abbey where we had a promotional display and sold books by local authors; this was our first public activity since the March 2020 lockdown, and it was a remarkable experience to be able to talk directly again with passers-by, including many Friends. Specifically for the event we commissioned the new Reading Abbey 900 badge, which we sold for £2 each or three for £5. We sold 137 badges, and 18 books, generating takings of £442.

To coincide with the Water Fest we also launched a town centre walking route, starting and finishing in the Abbey Quarter and taking in historic buildings on a circular route through Reading town centre. This is a virtual route and can be accessed through the website.

The University of Reading held two events to support Reading Abbey 900. The History Department held a virtual day seminar on the anniversary day itself, Friday 18 June, on Reading and its Royal Abbey, with papers on a wide range of related subjects given by 12 speakers, all of which will be published in *Reading Medieval Studies 2022*; individual papers also cross-referred to virtual exhibitions on the Reading Museum and Berkshire Record Office websites. And on 28 September, the Archaeology Department hosted a Reading Abbey 900 public lecture on the archaeology of Reading Abbey at the University by archaeologist and architectural historian Tim Tatton-Brown. The department has also secured funding to support a three-year post-graduate research student, from October 2021, who will work in conjunction with Reading Museum on Reading Abbey.

The WEA held a Reading Abbey Day School in Reading on 16 October, including a walk round the Abbey Ruins, which was fully booked.

Finally, the Co-Fraternity of St James used Reading Abbey 900 to promote a number of local initiatives, including the St James Way, a 68-mile pilgrimage trail running from Reading Abbey to Southampton which they are developing and signposting as part of the Camino Ingles, the historic pilgrimage trail from England to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, where the disciple St James the Great is buried. It is his hand that the medieval Abbey claimed as its greatest relic, and which made Reading Abbey the centre of English

pilgrimage related to St James in the High Middle Ages. The Co-Fraternity also arranged for the mummified hand found in the Abbey Ruins in the 1780s by builders working on the new House of Correction (gaol) to be brought to St James's RC church in Reading (from Marlow) for the celebration of the Feast of St James on 25 July this year. The Co-Fraternity have been working with FORA, Reading Borough Council and Living Reading on the promotion of St James's way and pilgrimage in Reading, including the launch in July of a local pilgrimage trail around Reading and Caversham, starting at Reading Abbey, which can be downloaded from websites.

Today's AGM will be followed by our Autumn Lecture by Dr Joanna Laynesmith, Research Fellow at the University of Reading, on *Queen Elizabeth Woodville*. As with the Spring Lecture, this is the talk deferred from 2020.

In addition, we have sent out three Newsletters to keep members informed of developments concerning the Abbey Quarter, and I have continued to send regular e-mail updates, two or three times a month. Alongside Reading Abbey 900, an interest this year has been the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) continuing marketing and disposal of Reading Gaol, which occupies the eastern quarter of the Abbey precinct. Having put the site on the market in April 2020 the MoJ accepted a bid for commercial and/or residential development, in the order of £8M, which the bidder withdrew in December 2020. The MoJ then offered Reading Council a short window, until 15 March 2021, to put together a business case, which the Council did, in the sum of £2.5M; this was not accepted by the MoJ, who re-marketed the site in the summer, whilst keeping the Council bid on the table: the deadline for new bids was mid-August; no further information has since been forthcoming.

One further lockdown project was the publication, through the FORA website, of *The Royal Abbey of Reading*, a paper given by Professor Brian Kemp, to the XXIInd Colloquium of the International Reynard Society, held at the University of Reading in 2017 under the auspices of the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies at the University. This was done in memory of Brian, and to coincide with the 2021 Zoom Spring Lecture.

During the year, promoted by Reading Abbey 900 and despite the lockdown, we have given 12 illustrated Zoom talks about the Abbey to 11 local groups; and three guided walks of the Abbey Quarter. A talk to the Caversham and District Residents' Association (CADRA), with a specific interest in Reading Gaol, attracted so much interest that it was repeated.

The lockdown has resulted in a squeeze on our membership, which in August 2021 stood at 205 memberships, compared with 241 last year. However, since our last AGM we have recruited 12 new memberships, but 24 have been cancelled through non-payment in 2019-2020 and a further 16 subscriptions still remain unpaid from 2020-21.

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 have been important in promoting the Reading Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021, and providing access to a growing number of virtual contributions, many of which are mentioned in this report. Our Facebook page reached 1,138 people over the year, with our posts on the local pilgrimage trail attracting particular interest, over 560 hits.

We have also found a new home to store our gazebos, displays and equipment, in the garage of a Friend; and have updated our membership form to allow it to be completed and submitted electronically.

It was with much sadness that we heard in February of the death of our Vice-President, Leslie Cram. Leslie, a long-term Friend, was Curator of Archaeology at Reading Museum until he retired in the 1990s, and therefore the keeper of the Reading Abbey collection at the Museum. He later moved to the East Midlands to be near to his family, where in recent years he was in very poor health.

After 2020, 2021 feels to have been a positive year, with a clear and successful focus on Reading Abbey 900, and the Committee and membership becoming confident and adept in using Zoom to bring the activities of FORA to a wider audience during the lockdown months. The challenge for the incoming committee for 2021-22 will be to find ways to maintain and build on the momentum created over the past year.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2021