

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 29 OCTOBER 2022

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2021-22

2021 is the 901st anniversary of the foundation of Reading Abbey, on 18 June 1121, and as in 2020-21, Reading Abbey 900 has been the focus of our activities over the past year. The Reading Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021 were restricted and limited by the national COVID-19 lockdowns and Government restrictions, but Reading Borough Council rose to the occasion by holding the Reading Water Fest as a public live event on Saturday 19 June 2021 which celebrated the Abbey's foundation, an event in which FORA was an active player; and our last AGM, in October 2021, was our first public meeting post-lockdown, following a year of Zoom activity, as set out in my report last year.

Our 2021 AGM was attended by 49 members, who conducted the business of the meeting, and elected the new Committee and officers for 2021-22. The Committee has met throughout the year, initially electronically via Zoom, but with the last two meetings being live. Two new members joined the Committee – Bill Gornall-King and Catherine Lorigan – and both have been quick to make active contributions to its work and impact.

Following last October's AGM, the Committee recognised the value of continuing to hold Zoom winter talks, given by members on topics of interest related to the Abbey, and one was given, on Thursday 29 January 2022, by Robin Dorkings of the Con-Fraternity of St James, talking about the work of the Con-Fraternity and its promotion of the St James Way as a modern pilgrimage trail between Reading and Southampton (68 miles) and an integral part of the establishment of a Camino Ingles in England.

On Saturday 26 March 2022 we held the first live (post-COVID) Professor Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture, our regular Spring Lecture, now dedicated to the memory of our late President and co-founder who died in August 2019 aged 79. The illustrated Lecture was given by Dr Freddy Teale, on *The Reading Formulary*, which Brian had been instrumental in locating and encouraging its public sale in 2013, when it was purchased by the Berkshire Record Office (with some financial help from FORA). This had been the subject of Dr Teale's PhD thesis, on which she had consulted Brian. The lecture, held at Reading Abbey Baptist Church, was attended by 50 members and friends.

Our next public event was the 2022 Reading Water Fest, held on Saturday 4 June as the focal point of local celebrations to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. As in 2021, the 2022 Water Fest was a high-profile event, with free activities and music taking place in the Forbury Gardens, Abbey Ruins and Chestnut Walk. FORA had a gazebo and book stall in the South Transept, alongside other local heritage groups including the Friends of Reading Museum, the Reading Civic Society, and the Con-Fraternity of St James; as in 2021 it was a great experience to be able to talk with passers-by, including many Friends.

On Saturday 18 June, the 901st anniversary date, we held an additional public lecture, our Summer Lecture, to fill a gap we had not been able to meet in 2021. The lecturer was Prof. James Clark, from the University of Exeter, on *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, about which he had published a seminal new work earlier in the year. Prof. Clark gave a fascinating illustrated talk, specifically tailored to Reading Abbey and the local experience of the dissolution. It was held at St James RC church, and attended by 35 members and friends.

Our partners in the Con-Fraternity of St James have continued to promote a number of local initiatives, including a joint walk with FORA along the first 10 miles of the St James Way, from Reading Abbey to Burghfield Common, held on Wednesday 20 July, in part to check the newly-erected waymarking. The Con-Fraternity also invited Friends to join them in a workshop to promote pilgrimage music and singing, held at Sulhampstead Abbots church on 23 July, to celebrate St James's Day (25 July).

For the first time since 2019, pre-Covid, we organised a FORA summer outing, to Abingdon, where we were hosted and refreshed by the Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust. The outing, which was attended by 40 members and friends, took in the remaining Abbey (monastic) buildings, St Nicolas church, St Helen's church, and the County Hall. The weather was kind and a great day was had by all.

On Sunday 24 July we joined forces with FORM and the Reading Civic Society to support the Caversham Court Dog Show, organised by local charity Ways & Means in conjunction with the Friends of Caversham Court Gardens. And on Saturday 6 August we took part in the first Berkshire Online Heritage Fair, organised by the Berkshire Family History Society and the Berkshire Local History Association, where we hosted a virtual breakout room which, sadly, attracted no visitors.

Today's AGM will be followed by our Autumn Lecture by Chris Darbyshire, local author and retired judge, on *The Trial & Execution of Hugh Cook Faringdon*, a subject on which he published a book, through the Scallop Shell Press, in 2018.

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 to members, two or three times a month. A continuing interest this year has been the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) failure to dispose of Reading Gaol, which occupies the eastern quarter of the Abbey precinct, and for which the deadline for the (second) re-marketing of the site had been August 2021, the original bidder (for £8M) having withdrawn in December 2020, and the MoJ having later not accepted (but kept on the table) a revised bid of £2.5M from Reading Borough Council earlier in the summer of 2021. In December 2021 the concept artist Banksy let it be known that he was prepared to put up for sale the stencil for his work on the perimeter wall of the Gaol, to raise a predicted £10M to support the purchase of the gaol site for heritage and cultural purposes. Reading East MP Matt Rodda has also launched a petition to preserve and enhance the gaol as an arts hub and to celebrate Reading's heritage, which to date has attracted over 9,000 signatures. Both Reading MPs, Matt Rodda and Alok Sharma, met with the Prisons Minister in the summer to promote this objective.

During the year, promoted by Reading Abbey 900 and despite the lockdown, we have returned to giving live talks about the Abbey, to 5 local groups; and run 3 guided walks of the Abbey Quarter.

The lockdown has resulted in a squeeze on our membership, which in August 2021 stood at 205 memberships, and now stands at 204. Since our last AGM we have recruited 5 new memberships, but 24 have been cancelled through non-payment in 2020-2021 and a further 8 subscriptions still remain unpaid from 2021-22, potentially bringing the membership numbers further down to below 200.

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 were very important in promoting the Reading Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021 and providing access to a growing number of virtual contributions. Figures for the year September 2021 to September 2022 show our post-lockdown activity. Our Facebook page for the period featured 30 posts, which reached over 5,000 people (compared with 1,138 in 2020-21). The largest hit (667) was for the announcement of the Professor Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture in March 2022, followed by the post of the Actor Liam Neeson's support for the Save Reading Gaol campaign (246). The average number of Facebook followers has also risen, from 190 in 2020-21 to 626.

After 2021, with its clear and successful focus on Reading Abbey 900, 2022 has been a year of consolidation, and in particular returning FORA to public activity and engagement to build on the momentum created by Reading Abbey 900. This will continue to be the Committee's focus for 2023 and beyond, alongside consolidating our membership, and recruiting more, younger members to take FORA forward into the future.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2022