

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 28 OCTOBER 2023

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2022-23

2022-23 was back to normal operation following the hiatus of the COVID years.

Our 2022 AGM was attended by 54 members, who conducted the business of the meeting, and elected the new Committee and officers for 2022-23. The Committee has met throughout the year, live. The AGM was followed by our Autumn Lecture, given by local author and retired judge **Chris Darbyshire** on ***The Trial & Execution of Hugh Cook Faringdon***, a subject on which he published a book, through the Scallop Shell Press, in 2018: this attracted an attendance of 79 people.

We held one Zoom winter talk, given by our Secretary on the evening of Thursday 28 February to an audience of 30. This was on the Reading and Caversham Pilgrimage Trail, which FORA was active in developing and launching in 2021, along with Living Reading (REDA's previous incarnation), Reading Borough Council, and the Confraternity of St James. It runs from the Abbey Quarter into Caversham to visit sites linked to the Shrine of Our Lady of Caversham, which was at Caversham manor at Dean's Farm in Lower Caversham. The Trail is the subject of a REDA leaflet, available locally, and companion web page: [RUK Pilgrims Map A4 Landscape print from website\(2\).pdf \(visit-reading.com\)](#)

The theme of pilgrimage was continued at the annual *Professor Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture*, held on **Saturday 18 March, at 2.30pm, in St James's RC Church, Forbury Road** and given by **Dr Jamie Ingram**, an archaeologist affiliated to the University of Southampton, on the topic of ***The Medieval Pilgrim Experience: arrival, destination and engagement***. This attracted an audience of 90 people to hear Dr Ingram talk with great knowledge and enthusiasm on this subject, a figure which matched if not exceeded our pre-COVID days.

To coincide with the Spring Lecture, we published on the FORA website a re-printed version of the talk **Brian Kemp** had given to FORA in 2012 on ***Reading Abbey's Financial Crises in the Late C13th***.

The Reading and Caversham Pilgrimage Trail was also one of two walks run by FORA during the first Reading Walks Festival, which saw 40 walks offered over a five-day period between 10-14 May. This was organised by REDA, Reading's Economy and Destination Agency. The second FORA walk was around the Abbey Quarter. Both were fully pre-booked and fully attended. The Festival will be repeated in May 2024, when FORA will again be leading walks.

On the theme of walks, Steve Vale, from the Loddon Valley Ramblers, led a walk on Wednesday 31 May, specifically for FORA members, along the Holy Brook, from Theale into central Reading, starting at Sheffield Bottom car park, near to Theale station. Nine Friends took part.

Our next public event was the Reading Water Fest, held on Saturday 10 June as the focal point of Reading's summer celebrations, with free activities and music taking place in the Forbury Gardens, Abbey Ruins and Chestnut Walk. As in previous years 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 Confraternity of St James; and despite the heat it was a great experience to be able to talk with passers-by, including many Friends.

Our 2023 FORA summer outing was on 26 July, to Smithfield, London, where we visited St Bartholomew the Great church and The Charterhouse. The outing, which was attended by 28 members and friends, involved travelling on the Elizabeth Line to Farringdon, where we assembled at the nearby Farmers' and Fletchers' Hall for morning coffee and an introductory pre-visit talk on St Barts, which was founded in 1123 by Rahere, a courtier to King Henry I, and is the only remaining Romanesque church in the City of London. We had an afternoon guided tour of The Charterhouse, followed by tea/coffee. Despite rail disruption, we made it to time in both directions!

Today's AGM will be followed by our Autumn Lecture by **Professor Lindy Grant**, emeritus of Reading University, on ***Burying the Royal Dead: Reading Abbey and royal pantheons in the high middle ages***.

We have sent out three Newsletters to keep members informed of developments concerning the Abbey Quarter, and the Secretary has 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) ongoing failure to dispose of Reading Gaol, which occupies the eastern quarter of the Abbey precinct, which has triggered the Save Reading Gaol Campaign and a local petition to preserve and enhance the gaol as an arts hub and to celebrate Reading's heritage. Both Reading MPs, Matt Rodda and Sir Alok Sharma, have met with successive Prisons Ministers to pursue this objective. We have also promoted the summer programme of events in the Abbey Ruins, including two outdoor plays staged by local companies: RABBLE's Henry I (June), the Progress Theatre's Twelfth Night (July); and the more recent Down at the Abbey independent music festival in early September. We welcome the diverse range of public events held in the Abbey Ruins, and Abbey Quarter more generally (including the Forbury Gardens).

During the year the Secretary has given live talks about the Abbey, to 6 local groups, and run 3 guided walks of the Abbey Quarter, all in return for contributions to FORA's funds.

The lockdown has resulted in a squeeze on our membership, which in August 2022 was 204 memberships, and now stands at 200. Over the past year we have recruited 8 new members, but lost 12.

FORA began the year with healthy finances, which remains the position. This included a Members' Fund of donations totalling £3,200, including the generous donation of £1,600 made at our 2022 AGM by the outgoing Mayor of Reading, David Stevens, from his 2021-22 charity appeal. The Committee over the year has given active consideration to how to use this positively, to the credit both of FORA and the Mayor's charity, and has committed expenditure of nearly £2,000 to two initiatives to promote Reading Abbey to the public. The first has been to fund the re-printing and publication of Brian Kemp's 1968 Guide to Reading Abbey, which was originally published by Reading Museum (for 2/6), but for many years had been out of print. This remains the best short guide to the foundation and history of the Abbey, and is now again available to buy, in the Museum shop, for a subsidised price (55 years later) of £5. The second has been to support Two Rivers Press in the sum of £420 in re-printing the Durrant and Painter Reading Abbey & Abbey Quarter book, first published in 2018, at the original subsidised price of £10. The end result of both exercises is that FORA now has a stock of copies of both publication which we can sell ourselves and which are part of our assets.

Our Vice-President, John Mullaney, published a new work, *Reading Abbey: a Pilgrim Church*, in the spring of this year, through the Scallop Shell Press. This was made available to FORA members at a discounted rate. It brings together a number of papers which John had previously issued, some of which are on the FORA website. John has kindly agreed to give any surplus from the sale of the book to FORA, for which we are most grateful.

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 October 2022 to June 2023 show our level of activity, with an average of 90 'hits' a month. Our Facebook page for the period featured 40 posts, which reached over 5,000 people (compared with 1,138 in 2020-21). The average number of Facebook followers has continued to rise, from 190 in 2020-21 to 626 in 2021-22 and 813 now.

We have continued to work in partnership with Reading Museum, both on the re-publication of the Kemp Guide, and on promotional works generally. An exercise to clean the signage in the Abbey Ruins, organised in conjunction with the Museum, was scuppered by heavy summer rain, but we are planning more and always keen to involve FORA members in such practical voluntary work. We have also worked in partnership with the Friends of Reading Museum, with whom we have plans for a joint coffee morning at the RISC building in London Street, where many stones from Reading Abbey can be seen. The Committee had a fascinating guided tour of the building in January 2023.

The year 2022-23 has been a year of consolidation, and in particular returning FORA to public activity and engagement following the COVID lockdown and building on the momentum created by Reading Abbey 900 in 2021. 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 2023