

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 26 OCTOBER 2024

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2023-24

Autumn Lecture 2023

Our 2023 AGM was attended by 53 members, who conducted the business of the meeting, and elected the new Committee and officers for 2023-24. The Committee has met five times during the year.

The AGM was followed by our Autumn Lecture, given by **Professor Lindy Grant**, emeritus of Reading University and of the Courtauld Institute, on ***Burying the Royal Dead: Reading Abbey and royal pantheons in the high middle ages***, of direct relevance to Reading Abbey as established by Henry I as a potential royal necropolis. This attracted an attendance of 75 people.

Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture – Saturday 2 March

We had our highest-ever turn-out of over 130 people for our Spring Lecture, given in memory of our late co-founder and past President, Professor Brian Kemp of the Reading University History Department. The lecture, at St James RC church in the Abbey Quarter, was by **Prof. Helen Parish**, a former colleague of Brian's at Reading University and now Senior Tutor at Wadham College Oxford, on the subject of ***Monks, miracles and memory: the dissolution of Reading Abbey and the writing of history in Reformation England***.

Publications

To coincide with the Spring Lecture, we published the following documents on the FORA website:

- ***Demolition and Excavation at Reading Abbey*** – 1964 paper by Brian Kemp and Cecil Slade
- ***Reading Abbey – a Study in Spirituality and Geometry*** – new paper by John Mullaney

Reading Walks Festival – May 2024

FORA offered one walk for the 2024 Reading Walks Festival, which saw 40 walks offered over an eight-day period between 11-19 May. This was organised by REDA, Reading's Economy and Destination Agency. The walk was ***Abbot Cook's last journey***, and followed the route taken by the Abbot and his two companions when they were drawn to their execution in the Abbey Precinct on 14 November 1539.

Federation of European Cluniac Sites – 30th Anniversary Promotion

Reading Abbey was founded in 1121 by monks from Cluny Abbey in France, and Lewes Priory, Cluny's daughter house in England. FORA subscribes to the Federation of European Cluniac Sites (FESC), which was set up in 1994 to promote awareness of Cluniac foundations across Europe. 2024 was FESC's 30th anniversary and FESC invited its members to run and publicise activities to celebrate this. We did so, with the support of Reading Borough Council. Our proposal was accepted by FESC, and we used their logo for our events to celebrate the Federation's 30th anniversary this summer.

Water Fest - Saturday 8 June

This year's Reading Water Fest, held on Saturday 8 June, was a success, despite indifferent morning weather. FORA had a stand in the heritage area of the South Transept, alongside Reading Museum and the Friends of Reading Museum (FORM), the Reading Civic Society, the Confraternity of St. James, and the Progress Theatre. This year is FESC's 30th anniversary and our Water Fest display this year was focused on Cluny Abbey and the spread of Cluniac monasticism in Europe and Britain. Our children's trail was promoted as 'ClunyKids' and attracted forty entrants, our largest number.

To celebrate the FESC anniversary we promoted a special performance on the acoustic stage in the South Transept by local musicians Simon Mayor and Hilary James, which was generously funded by the Earley Charity. The FESC and Earley Charity links were featured in a special flier by the stage. Simon and Hilary concluded their set by singing *Sumer is Icumen in*.

Summer Outing – Gloucester

Our Summer Outing for members took place on Wednesday 17 July, with a coach trip to Gloucester to visit the cathedral and the Blackfriars Priory, both in the city centre. It was attended by thirty-eight people, who had an entertaining and informative - and sunny - day. Pictures have been published on the FORA Facebook page.

A further members' outing has been arranged, to **Westminster Abbey**, on Monday 28 October, involving guided tours both of the Abbey church and to the Abbey Library and Muniment Room where a seal from Reading Abbey is held.

Cluny Lecture - Saturday 28 September

The second part of our programme of celebrations for the 30th anniversary of the European Federation of Cluniac Sites (FESC) was to hold an additional public lecture on Saturday 28 September, on **Reading Abbey in the Context of Cluny**. This was organised in conjunction with the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies (GCMS) and the History Department at the University of Reading, and was given by **Caroline Johnson**, a post-graduate member of GCMS and also a FORA committee member, at St. James's RC Church in The Forbury.

AGM and Autumn Lecture - Saturday 26 October

Our year finishes with our AGM, followed by our Autumn Lecture, which will be given by **David Sanchez**, from the Thames Valley Archaeological Service, on their 2019 excavations, **Tiles for the Abbey: a medieval tiling and occupation at 40-68 Silver Street, Reading**. David had given a similar talk to the Friends of Reading Museum, in 2023. The AGM and Lecture will be at the Abbey Baptist Church at 2.30pm (doors open at 2.00pm).

Reading Gaol

A continuing interest this year has been the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) ongoing disposal of Reading Gaol, closed in 2013, which occupies the eastern quarter of the Abbey precinct, and 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. The gaol was finally sold in the Spring to the Ziran Foundation, owned by Mr Channing Bi who was present at Water Fest and with whom contact was made.

Also present was a representative from VisiAR Augmented Reality which offers the opportunity, by scanning a QR code on a mobile phone, to walk around the Abbey Quarter with the phone showing a 3-D representation of the Abbey buildings overlaid on the current layout, using Reading Museum's 3-D model of the Abbey Quarter.

Reading Library

An emerging interest this year has been the Council's decision to use Government Levelling-Up grant to relocate Reading Library to the extended Civic Offices in Bridge Street. This is due to happen by 2026, and the Council put the site up for sale, for residential conversion or redevelopment, in July 2024. The Library is part-located in the Abbey Precinct, occupying the site of the Abbey Stables. The current building dates from 1985, when stones from the Abbey site were found and put on display alongside the building in Abbey Square, although now sadly overgrown. The Committee offered comments to the public

consultation on the Library move, and has since raised three matters with the Council, relating to future archaeology on the site, the future of the stones, and ongoing access to the permissive path alongside the Holy Brook which can be accessed from behind the Library.

Communication

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

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. Website figures for the year October 2023 to March 2024 show our level of activity, with an average of 77 'hits' a month, down from the 2022-23 average of 90 a month.

The **Facebook** page for the period October 2023 to August 2024 featured over 30 posts, reaching approximately 5,000 people. Among the events actively promoted were the Rabble Theatre's Production of Henry I, Reading Festival of Walks, St Frideswide's Pilgrimage Walk, Down at the Abbey Music Festival, Water Fest and updates on plans for Reading Gaol. The average number of Facebook followers continued its steady rise from 626 in 2021-22, 813 in 2022-23 and over 1,000 from Oct - Aug 2023-24.

Partnership

We have continued to work in partnership with Reading Museum and the **Reading Abbey Revealed** team to promote Reading Abbey. Before Water Fest we spent a morning cleaning the signage in the Abbey Precinct, organised in conjunction with the Museum, we are planning more such sessions, and are 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 many joint members, and held a joint coffee morning at the RISC building in London Street, where many stones from Reading Abbey can be seen, on 4 October 2023.

We have positive working with the **Confraternity of St James**, in particular concerning the promotion of the **St James's Way** long-distance pilgrimage trail from Reading Abbey to Southampton; and the newer **St Frideswide's Way** from Oxford to Reading Abbey, launched in June this year. Both are being developed as part of the *Camino Ingles*.

In December-January, the Berkshire Record Office celebrated its 75th anniversary and change of name to the **Royal Berkshire Archives** by staging a 'Favourites' exhibition of hidden gems from its collection chosen by the Archives' staff. On 18 January there was a joint visit by a small party of FORA and **History of Reading Society** members.

Talks and Visits

During the year the Secretary has given live **talks** about the Abbey, to five local groups, all in return for contributions to FORA's funds.

The Committee also welcomed visits to the Abbey Quarter from the Friends of St Mary's Iffley, the Oscar Wilde Society (on Water Fest day), and a Somerset venture scout troupe who were walking the St James Way.

Membership

Our **membership** over the past year has been stable. In August 2023 it was 200 memberships, and now stands at 202. Over the past year we have recruited 11 new members, but lost nine.

Finances

FORA began the year with healthy finances, which remains the position. As mentioned above, during the year we were successful in getting a grant of £2,000 from the Earley Charity towards our FESC celebrations, on which we spent just under £1,000 of the grant. The Earley Charity have been very generous in letting us keep the remainder, which the Committee plans to spend on two important activities next year to celebrate the 40th anniversary of FORA's own foundation, in 1985. The first of these is a **Schools' Art Competition on the theme Reading Abbey, Past Present and Future**, which will be judged by local artist and typographer Martin Andrews. The second is putting up a **blue plaque outside RISC** in London Street to draw attention to Reading Abbey stones in the building.

Summary

The year 2023-24 has been a year of consolidation and public activity and engagement, to maintain the momentum created by Reading Abbey 900 in 2021. This will continue to guide the Committee's work for 2024 and beyond, alongside consolidating our membership, and recruiting more and younger members to take FORA forward into the future.

2025 marks the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Friends of Reading Abbey in 1985. This – **FORA 40** – will be a particular focus, in particular the Schools Art Competition, mentioned above. The flier for the Competition is enclosed, and schools are being contacted this term, with an invitation to submit entries by Christmas, with a view to a public exhibition being staged next summer.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2024