

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

AGM – 25 OCTOBER 2025

SECRETARY'S REPORT 2024-25

Autumn Lecture 2024

Our 2024 AGM was attended by 36 members, who conducted the business of the meeting, and elected the new Committee and officers for 2024-25. The Committee has met five times during the year. One Committee member resigned on grounds of ill-health in January 2025, and was replaced by the co-opted member.

The AGM was followed by our Autumn Lecture, given by **David Sánchez**, Projects Coordinator for the Thames Valley Archaeological Services, on ***Tiles for the Abbey: A Medieval Tilery and Occupation at 40-68 Silver Street. Reading***, which supplied tiles for Reading Abbey. This attracted an attendance of 48 people.

Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture – Saturday 2 March

We had a turn-out of over 77 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 **Dr Ruth Salter**, of the History Department and Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies at Reading University, on the subject of ***Medicine for the Monks: Medieval Monastic Infirmaries, Healthcare, and Reading Abbey***.

FORA 40 – 40th Anniversary Promotion

The Friends of Reading Abbey was set up in 1985, and to celebrate this we used funding from the Earley Charity to support a Schools' Art Competition, and the installation of a blue plaque at the RISC building in London Street, of which more below.

Water Fest - Saturday 8 June

This year's Reading Water Fest, held on Saturday 28 June, was a success, on a hot, dry summer day. FORA had a stand in the heritage area of the South Transept, alongside the Confraternity of St. James, and other heritage groups.

Our display this year was images of the entries to the FORA **Schools' Art Competition**, on the theme ***Reading Abbey, Past Present and Future***, held to commemorate the 40th anniversary of our foundation, in 1985, and part-funded by the Earley Charity. All schools in greater Reading were contacted in October 2024, and the competition attracted 15 excellent entries which were judged by local artist and typographer Martin Andrews, retired President of the Reading Guild of Artists. The entries were on show in The Blade foyer for the last two weeks of June.

Also on display, and attracting interest, was a **scale model** of the original, Romanesque, Abbey church, being created by local author and historian and our Vice-President John Mullaney.

We also ran our popular children's trail in the Abbey Precinct, and our bookstall.

The Schools' Art Competition entries were first put on display at a **Members' Coffee Morning**, held in the Boyes Turner offices at Abbot's House on Friday 13 June. Martin Andrews attended and talked about the competition and the entries. John Mullaney brought along his scale model of the abbey church, for its first outing. We also had an update on **Reading Gaol**, which is a continuing interest.

Our **Summer Outing** for members was held on Wednesday 23 July, to Harmondsworth Great Barn and Syon Park and House, in west London. Thirty members took part. The Great Barn, now owned by English Heritage, is a Grade 1 listed oak- framed barn with intact interior, built in 1426 by Winchester College, and 215 feet long, 40 feet wide and 26 feet high. Syon House is a C16th house, later (and still) owned by the Dukes of Northumberland, founded on the site of a Bridgettine Abbey founded in 1426, the undercroft of which is still extant and was visited.

Reading Abbey Stones. Also as part of our 40th anniversary celebrations, we commissioned a **blue plaque outside RISC** in London Street to draw attention to the Reading Abbey Stones in the building. This was also funded in part by the Earley Charity, for which we are most grateful. This was publicly unveiled by the Mayor of Reading, Cllr Alice Mpufo-Coles on Tuesday 22 July.

Images of the above activities can be found on our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfReadingAbbey/>

'Our River Thames' Exhibition, Royal Berkshire Archive. We organised a members' visit on Friday 22 August to see The Royal Berkshire Archive's current exhibition, on the River Thames, attended by 13.

Our **AGM and Autumn Lecture** will take place on Saturday 25 October 2025, at the Abbey Baptist Church. The Autumn Lecture will be given by **Dr Euan Roger**, from The National Archives, on ***Resilience & Transformation: Community Life at St George's College and Chapel, Windsor Castle, in the Fifteenth and early Sixteenth Centuries.***

Reading Gaol

A continuing interest in 2026 will be Reading Gaol, closed in 2013, which occupies the eastern quarter of the Abbey precinct. The Ministry of Justice sold the gaol in Spring 2024 to the Ziran Foundation, owned by Mr Channing Bi, who held a briefing on 25 November 2024 with his (then) development team on his plans for the Gaol site, which they now are calling The ReCentre. Since then there has been no formal update, but in the summer there was evidence of the gaol building being used for filming.

St James's Way

We are pleased to work in partnership with the **Confraternity of St James** to promote 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 2024. Both are being developed as part of the *Camino Ingles*. FORA is supporting the installation of a *mouteira* (stone direction sign) in Chestnut Walk, as a prominent way of promoting St James's Way at a key public point in its route from where it leaves the Abbey Ruins to join the Kennet towpath, and with a design which has a direct connection with the Camino network across Europe.

Reading Library

Another continuing interest has been Reading Council's use of Government Levelling-Up grant to relocate Reading Library to the extended Civic Offices in Bridge Street, where building work is in full swing with a view to the library relocating during 2026. The Library is part-located in the Abbey Precinct, occupying the site of the Abbey Stables, and the Council put it up for sale, for residential conversion or redevelopment, in July 2024. 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. FORA has 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 electronic version now includes additional images of FORA events. 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 August 2024 to August 2025 show our level of activity, with an average of 77 'hits' a month. This is a declining trend, and in August 2025 we only had 49 'hits'.

Facebook

An increase in posts on our Facebook page for the period August 2024 to September 2025 reflected an active year for the Friends. Among events featured were the Friends Autumn 2024 Outing, re-naming of Reading Gaol, Reading's Christmas Lights, the preview of the new RABBLE play, *William the Conqueror*, our Summer Outing to Harmondsworth and Syon, the re-location of the Central Library, and Reading Museum's Open Sundays in September 2025. The Schools' Art Competition attracted 1,048 views and the RISC blue plaque attracted 624 views. Our number of Facebook followers is rising slowly and to date is 1,021.

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, our second such event. We will take part in 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 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, both being developed as part of the *Camino Ingles*.

Talks and Visits

During the year the Secretary has given live **talks** about the Abbey, and led one walk, to three local groups, in return for contributions to FORA's funds.

Membership

Our **membership** over the past year has been stable, at 203: 42 life members, 111 single, 44 family, and 6 institutional. Over the past year we have recruited 13 new members, to replace the same number.

Finances

FORA began the year with healthy finances, which remains the position. During 2024 we were successful in getting a grant of £2,000 from the Earley Charity towards our celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the Federation of European Cluniac Sites, of which we are a member, on which we spent just under £1,000 of the grant. The Earley Charity were very generous in letting us keep the remainder,

which the Committee spent on the two activities to celebrate the 40th anniversary of FORA's own foundation, in 1985, the **Schools' Art Competition** on the theme Reading Abbey, Past Present and Future, and putting up a **blue plaque outside RISC** in London Street to draw attention to Reading Abbey stones in the building.

Summary

The year 2024-25 has been a year of consolidation and public activity and engagement, using the 40th anniversary of our foundation in 1985 to maintain the momentum created by Reading Abbey 900 in 2021. This will continue to guide the Committee's work for 2026 and beyond, alongside consolidating our membership, and recruiting more and younger members to take FORA forward into the future.

John Painter, Secretary, October 2025