

THE FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

SPRING NEWSLETTER 2025



Patrons:

*The Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire
The Right Worshipful the Mayor of Reading
The Right Reverend the Bishop of Reading
The Vice-Chancellor, Reading University*

*The Abbot of Douai
The MP for Reading Central
The MP for Reading West and Mid-Berks*

President: Janet Bond

Vice President: John Mullaney

BRIAN KEMP MEMORIAL LECTURE
Saturday 29 March at 2.30pm, St James' RC Church,
Forbury Road, RG1 3FD

***Medicine for the Monks: Medieval Monastic Infirmaries,
Healthcare, and Reading Abbey***

Dr Ruth Salter

This talk will focus on healthcare within the medieval monastery, with particular attention to English communities in the high Middle Ages. Would all who were sick have been sent to the infirmary and what were such spaces like? What forms of therapeutic care and medicine may have been on offer in these monastic houses, and what level of medical knowledge was available to these communities and to the 'average monk'? Special attention will be given to Reading Abbey and what we may be able to learn about the now-lost infirmary, its function and possibly its positioning and appearance.

The miracles attributed to St James at Reading, carefully translated by the late Brian Kemp, will also offer insight into broader understanding of healing within Reading's monastic community and how 'earthly' and miraculous medicines were both part and parcel of medieval healthcare.

Ruth is a lecturer in medieval history in the Department of History at the University of Reading. She is a member of the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies (GCMS) and the Centre for Health Humanities (CHH), both also at Reading. Ruth has published on medieval health and healing and has a particular interest in accounts of healing miracles.



St James's RC Church is next to Reading Gaol, in the Abbey Precinct.
It will be open from 2.00pm. FREE entry, with a voluntary retiring collection.
ALL ARE WELCOME

AGM AND AUTUMN LECTURE, SATURDAY 26 OCTOBER 2024

Our 2024 AGM was held at the Abbey Baptist Church, with an attendance of 48. An unchanged committee was elected for 2024-25.

The AGM was followed by the Autumn Lecture, given by David Sánchez, of Thames Valley Archaeological Services, on the medieval tilery excavated in Silver Street, Reading, in 2019.

David was the Project Coordinator and the supervisor for the excavations, and described the results of an open area excavation undertaken in two stages on the western side of Silver Street which revealed several phases of activity. The first occupation of the site consisted of a Medieval tilery comprising two tile kilns and a well, dated between the 12th and 14th centuries. The tilery was supplying tiles to the Abbey as demonstrated by designs on wasters from the kilns matching designs on tiles recorded in-situ in the floor of the Abbey cloister in excavations of the 1960s (*as pictured*). Abandonment of the tilery was followed by a phase of intensive domestic occupation of the site in the late Medieval period.

The talk was very well received and generated a good number of questions.

The excavation report can be seen on the TVAS website [TVAS Reading: Silver Street, Reading Excavation Talk for Friends of Reading Abbey](#).

Reports of other local excavations are also available on the site, which is well worth visiting.

Photos by kind permission of Thames Valley Archaeological Services



David Sánchez and Dr Peter Durrant



ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2024 FORA hosted an extra lecture to mark the 30th anniversary of the European Federation of Cluniac sites. Held in St James' church, the talk on **'READING ABBEY IN THE CONTEXT OF CLUNY'** was given by Caroline Johnson and drew a very large audience. Reading Abbey was a Cluniac foundation and we heard how the great abbey of Cluny, supported by members of the leading royal families of

Europe and under the leadership of able and dynamic abbots, came to hold a position of unparalleled influence. With a strong emphasis on devotion and a culture that valued beauty and fine craftsmanship, at its peak Cluny was the centre of a network of hundreds of monasteries across Europe, including many in England. Henry I was a benefactor of Cluniac monasteries, and indeed of Cluny itself, and by founding Reading Abbey in the Cluniac tradition he ensured that it was placed in the mainstream of European monasticism, and for much of its existence the European connections remained an important feature of its life.



Caroline Johnson is a FORA committee member and a third-year, part-time, PhD candidate with the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Reading.

AUTUMN OUTING TO WESTMINSTER ABBEY ON 28 OCTOBER 2024



Inspired by our Vice-President, John Mullaney, who has a link with the Westminster Abbey Library, a trip was organised last October for a maximum of 20 people.

The group assembled at Westminster Abbey and enjoyed a guided tour of the Abbey with morning coffee provided in the Abbey's Cellarium Café. In the afternoon we had guided tours to the Muniment Room, whose archive is one of the oldest and richest in England and also to the Abbey Library, which holds a Reading Abbey Seal.

Photograph of the group is by kind permission of Chris Widdows.

VISION FOR THE PRISON SITE : ZIRAN FOUNDATION PRESENTATION

On Monday 24 November 2024, the new owner of Reading Gaol, Mr Channing Bi of the Ziran Foundation, held a briefing meeting for interested community groups, including FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY. This was an opportunity to meet with Mr Bi and his evolving development team, and to hear their current thinking about the future use of the gaol site, which Ziran now calls the ReCentre. The meeting was convened and chaired by Tony Page, former Mayor and retired, long-serving Councillor for Reading Borough, who is now overseeing public engagement on the site for Ziran. The presentation slides from this important and informative meeting can be viewed on <https://www.ziraned.org>. The signs appear to be positive, as indicated in the extract below, taken from the online presentation.

REVITALISING HERITAGE

Repurposing the unique building, whilst respecting the significance of the historic fabric.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Respecting the archaeological significance of the site and showcasing the unique history and any findings.

MAXIMISE PUBLIC SPACE

Give back the neglected space to the town and establish a function that resonates with the local community.

SPACE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

A wide-ranging contemporary art programme that showcases local and international artists.

UNIQUE HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCE

Deliver a unique hotel that complements the history and character of the Prison, respecting the listed fabric.

PROMOTE MULTI PURPOSE SPACES

Curating a mix of different uses to create a critical mass and new identity for the building that attracts localised visitors.



FORA at 40

In 2025 we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of The Friends of Reading Abbey.

The group was founded in 1985 to promote awareness of the abbey, its history and architecture, and to support the conservation of the abbey ruins. This year, we will celebrate our 40th anniversary with two important activities:

The first is our **SCHOOLS' ART COMPETITION** on the theme of **Reading Abbey, Past Present and Future**, to encourage interest and awareness of the Abbey amongst local children. All schools in greater Reading were contacted in October 2024 with a deadline for entries of the end of January 2025. To date, 14 submissions have been received. Entries will be judged by local artist and typographer Martin Andrews in Spring 2025. A display of entries will take place in June 2025, venue to be decided.



Our second activity is to place a **BLUE PLAQUE outside RISC** in London Street to draw attention to the Reading Abbey stones in the building. The photo shows just one of the impressive collection on-site, which a group of FORA members were able to view in January 2023. The design of the plaque is well underway, in consultation with RISC.



In 2024 we received a grant from the charity towards our Federation of European Cluniac Sites celebrations. Not all of the grant was needed for this purpose and the Earley Charity very generously allowed us to keep the remaining balance, which is funding the Schools' Art Competition and the Blue Plaque for the RISC building.

READING LIBRARY

FORA will continue to monitor the relocation of Reading Library to the extended Civic Offices in Bridge Street, by 2026. The three issues of interest to FORA, which have been raised with the Council relate to future archaeology on the site, the future of the stones from the abbey site (which lay beside the library building), and ongoing access to the permissive path alongside the Holy Brook. The Council have stated that these points will be considered as part of the planning process for the site.

YOUR DIARY DATES FOR 2025

29 March

10- 18 May

28 June

25 October

The Brian Kemp Memorial Lecture. St James' RC Church at 2.30pm.

Reading Walks Festival. This will be the 3rd of this very successful festival and more details will be given once the programme has been announced.

Water Fest. A later date than in previous years - *but FORA will be present.*

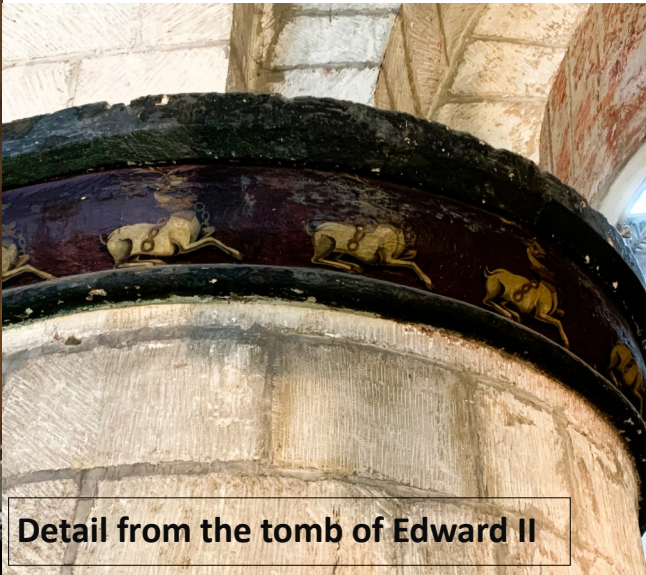
AGM and Autumn Lecture to be given by **Dr Euan Roger**, principal records specialist in the medieval team at The National Archives.



READING
WATER FEST
2024



SUMMER OUTING TO GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL —



Detail from the tomb of Edward II

AND BLACKFRIARS - GARDEN AND SCRIPTORIUM, 17 JULY 2024

