

THE FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

SPRING NEWSLETTER 2026



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BRIAN KEMP MEMORIAL LECTURE

**Saturday 14 March at 2.30pm, St James' RC Church,
Forbury Road, RG1 3FD**

PATRONAGE, SCHOLARSHIP AND SCANDAL: THE STORY OF MALMESBURY ABBEY TONY McALEAVY

The Benedictine monastery at Malmesbury in Wiltshire was an important institution throughout the Middle Ages. Tony McAleavy will tell the story of the building and the community from its foundation in the seventh century to the Dissolution under Henry VIII. He will analyse the architecture of the church - which includes some of the most important Romanesque sculpture in England - and describe the colourful lives of several medieval monks who were a remarkable assortment of saints, distinguished scholars and rogues.

Tony McAleavy read history at Oxford and is the Chief Education Officer for the Education Development Trust, based in Reading. He has written extensively on different historical topics and recently published the first ever full-length history of Malmesbury Abbey.



**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 25 OCTOBER 2025

Our Chairman, Dr Peter Durrant opened the meeting and reported on what had been an active 40th anniversary year. He thanked our Secretary John Painter, for his hard work and that of the committee. Following reports from the Secretary and Treasurer, the committee members and officers were elected, unchanged. The autumn lecture, given by Dr Euan Roger of the National Archives, revealed fascinating glimpses into life at St George's Chapel and College, Windsor, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It was such an interesting topic that an edited version is printed on the last page of the newsletter, from notes kindly provided by Dr Roger.



Dr Euan Roger with FORA secretary, John Painter - and audience gathers inside the Abbey Baptist Church. Below, St George's Chapel (Wikipedia), and John Mullaney's model of Reading Abbey church, on view at the AGM.



DIARY DATES FOR 2026

14 March	BRIAN KEMP MEMORIAL LECTURE	St James' RC Church, Reading at 2.30pm.
22 May	COFFEE MORNING	The focus of this will be <i>Malcolm Summers'</i> new book, <i>Dr Hurry and Reading Abbey</i> . Full details to follow.
27 June	WATERFEST	11 - 5 Forbury Gardens, Abbey Ruins, Chestnut Walk.
JULY	FRIENDS SUMMER OUTING TO MALMESBURY ABBEY.	<i>Date and programme to be finalised.</i>

UNVEILING OF CAMINO MILESTONE MARKER, 19 NOVEMBER 2025

The morning began with a snow storm, but luckily this had cleared by the time the ceremony took place in Chestnut Walk, alongside the abbey ruins. The formal unveiling of the granite Milestone was performed by Reading's Mayor, Alice Mpfu-Coles and the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire. Dignitaries from Galicia and the Spanish Embassy and members of the Confraternity of St James UK were present and made speeches.

A blessing was given by the Revd Canon Ainsley Swift on behalf of the Archdeaconry of Berkshire.



From left to right: Sue Sargeant, Chair of the Confraternity of Saint James UK, Ildefonso De La Campa Montenegro, Director of Xacobeo; Lord Lieutenant, Mr Andrew Try; The Revd Canon Ainsley Swift; The Mayor of Reading, Dr Alice Mpfu-Coles; Bernardo Fernández, President of the Camino Inglés Association (ACCI); Antonio Leira Piñeiro, Representative for the Caminos A Coruña.

The impressive marker, known in Galician as a 'mouteira', was donated and shipped by the Galician Government in Spain as a gift to the town. It marks the official start of St. James' Way, a 70-mile pilgrimage route from Reading to Southampton and forms part of the English section of the historic Camino Inglés, one of the official routes of the world-renowned Camino de Santiago, which ends at the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

New pilgrims are beginning to visit Reading and its Abbey, before starting out on the way-marked St James' Way. Passports are stocked at the Reading Museum shop, along with other items for the Camino journey. Members of the FORA committee attended this memorable event, which was covered by BBC News.



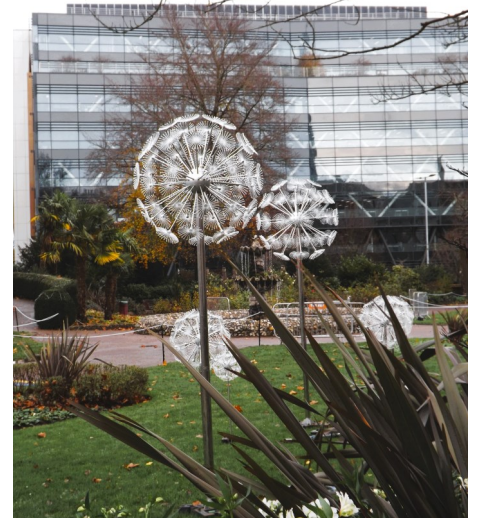


MORE PHOTOS
FROM
19 NOVEMBER 2025





Plus two photos of the 'Illuminate Reading Light Trail' installations within Forbury Gardens, and Abbey Ruins in daylight, November 25.



RESILIENCE & TRANSFORMATION: Community Life at St George's College and Chapel, Windsor Castle, in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries an edited version of our Autumn 2025 Lecture (given by Dr Euan Roger, Principal Medieval Specialist at the National Archives).

St George's College and Chapel were founded in August 1348 by Edward III, when a chapel in the lower ward of Windsor Castle, formerly dedicated to St Edward, was re-founded as a new collegiate foundation, now dedicated to 'the honour of God, the Virgin Mary and Saints George the Martyr and Edward the Confessor'. The new foundation took a few years to become fully established but by 1352 a series of statutes and ordinances existed to regulate the composition and governance of St George's. The new college was to comprise of a warden (later styled Dean) and twelve secular canons, with thirteen vicars and four clerks to aid them, as well as six choristers and a verger, with provisions for a group of twenty-six individuals styled as 'poor knights'. This was intended to support men who had fought in the king's wars in France and had been impoverished in the process.

As the college moved into the fifteenth century, things took a turn for the worse as England faced widespread economic depression caused by depopulation and plague, among other factors. For a college that was at times living hand-to-mouth – reliant on their tenants to pay rent in a timely fashion – this was a dangerous period. Edward IV's reign saw investment in St George's with the beginnings of a construction project to provide a grand new chapel for the college. Most importantly for the college, however, was a substantial victory gained in January 1483, when they secured a confirmation in parliament that they were no longer required to support the poor knights, who were instead to be provided for with a new royal endowment. However, the death of their patron Edward IV within a few months, threw the whole project into uncertainty yet again. For the poor knights, there was an added concern, as Edward had not provided a new endowment for their support before his death.

In the reign of Richard III, the college was able to secure one of their biggest coups at this point, the relocation of the remains of Henry VI to the pilgrim's corner at Windsor. The reinterment of Henry VI was commemorated in a grand fashion on 13 August 1484.

The college would see one last transformation in the sixteenth century, resolving at long last the problem of the poor knights after almost two centuries of difficulty and compromise. The 'new dotation', a gift of almost £600 in return for prayers and commemorative services granted in Henry VIII's will, provided at long last a new foundation for the poor knights, albeit in reduced numbers.

Through the trials of the fifteenth century, from unpaid wages to unruly vicars, to the transformative (if long-winded) process of refoundation and rebuilding, the members of the medieval collegiate community of St George's Windsor were both resilient and dedicated. During the turmoil of civil war, royal changes of mind and economic recession they often had to be. Through their actions, however, they were able to develop and nurture established patronage networks (royal and noble), a new attractive commemorative and pilgrimage function, and fiscal security – and perhaps most importantly fiscal independence – which would lead to the grand new institution and building which we know today.