

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - November 2020

### Reading Abbey

---

The meeting of Wargrave Local History Society in November was another held on-line using the Zoom program, when John Painter gave an illustrated presentation on Reading's Abbey Quarter. John is secretary of the Friends of Reading Abbey - who have worked to support Reading council's efforts to restore the ruins to a safe condition in time for their 900th anniversary, and co-author with the chairman, Peter Durrant, of the recent book 'Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter',



The abbey was founded in 1121 by Henry I, who is also buried within its grounds. John explained that people believed that by providing such facilities they would help the salvation of their soul, and spend a shorter period in purgatory after they died before moving on to heaven. The greater their need for prayer, the more they funded, and Henry I founded a large abbey. The site at Reading was chosen as it was - as now - an important nodal point for travellers. Henry, as Lord of the Manor, owned the land there, with the town itself centred around the St Mary's Butts area, where local markets were held.



It took 44 years for the large church to be built, being consecrated in 1164, but the monastic buildings were erected in about 5 years, and the chancel of the church had been completed by January 1136, as Henry I (who died in 1135) was buried there then. It followed the Cluniac tradition, the leading foundation in France at the time, but Henry insisted that it be a free-standing abbey, and not a daughter of the French establishment - hence it was not a priory.

Like most monastic houses, much of the income for Reading Abbey depended on religious relics that they held. Pilgrims came to Reading to visit the Hand of St James the Great, in order to gain indulgences for their sins (and hence spend less time in purgatory). The hand had been brought from Germany by Empress Matilda, Henry I's daughter, in the 1120s. It was considered an important relic, as it had a direct connection to Jesus Christ. The body of St James the Great is buried at Santiago de Compostela, in northern Spain, and has both hands, so it seems more likely that the relic at Reading was a splinter of bone, rather than the complete hand, as sometimes portrayed. Reading, though, became part of a pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela.

Throughout its existence, Reading was a royal abbey, and Henry made regular visits with his court. This practice continued until the time of Henry VIII - partly as the abbey owned favoured hunting grounds to the south of Reading. In Edward III's reign, several royal betrothals and marriages took place at Reading Abbey, and at times Parliament met there. It was convened there in 1453, but at other times had to move out of London due to the occurrence of plagues. When Parliament was meeting at Reading in 1464, Edward IV felt he had to attend in order to declare that he had married an English girl, Elizabeth Woodville, rather than a foreign princess that was being arranged by the Earl of Warwick ("the Kingmaker").

The Abbot had become Lord of the Manor of Reading, and so had control of the town markets etc. Relations with the town guild over this came to a head in 1253, and the King then granted the rights to the townspeople, but also reconfirmed the Abbott as Lord of the Manor. The Abbott was thus responsible for selecting the Mayor - chosen from 3 names submitted by the guild, and this process continued until September 1539, when the abbey became one of the last to be dissolved. The last Abbot was Hugh Faringdon, who refused to surrender to the Crown - as a result he was hung drawn and quartered in front of the west gate of the abbey precincts. The abbey then returned to the Crown but, unusually, was not sold on. Henry VIII continued to visit, and planned to convert it to a palace, and Elizabeth I came regularly. The abbey church was not degraded, as many had been, although anything removable was taken out, and Magdalen College, Oxford, reputedly bought linen-fold panels in 1540 from the abbey. However, Edward VI gave the abbey to his uncle, the Duke of Somerset, who began to strip the abbey of anything saleable - the roof was removed, the bells melted down, and the glass removed, and the abbey church demolished at that time. Some of the stone was bought for the rebuilding of St Mary's in the Butts. Edward was succeeded by Mary Tudor, who despite being a Catholic, allowed the destruction to continue, with the Lady Chapel being demolished to provide materials for building the Poor Knight's residence at Windsor Castle. Some abbey land was also given to St Laurence's church (which survived the destruction as it was also a church for the town) to create a burial ground - part of its surrounding wall being Tudor.

Reading Abbey had been built in the Romanesque style, with carved decorations typical of the time. It was built using stone from Taynton in Oxfordshire (the stone for Blenheim Palace also came from there). The destruction of the buildings was comprehensive, and much of the stonework was sold off in 1549, many pieces being transported along the Thames where examples were found in Sonning and Shiplake in the 19th century, whilst other stones from the abbey were used to build Conway's Bridge. Many other abbeys in the country were redeveloped over time, so the surviving examples that have been put on view in Reading Museum are amongst the best in the country. Despite the demolition, much still survives above ground (although not of the abbey church), such as the inner gateway, the mill arch, the hospitium (where guests would stay). Elizabeth I was keen on developing the site as a royal palace, and also gave Reading a new charter in 1560, which transferred the liabilities for roads and bridges to the town council. The hospitium had been built in the 12th century to provide for visiting pilgrims, and when that ended its dormitory was used to establish Reading Grammar School. The Corporation also used part of the building as the Guildhall from 1570 until new civic buildings alongside came into use in 1780. The building later became the first home of Reading University College.

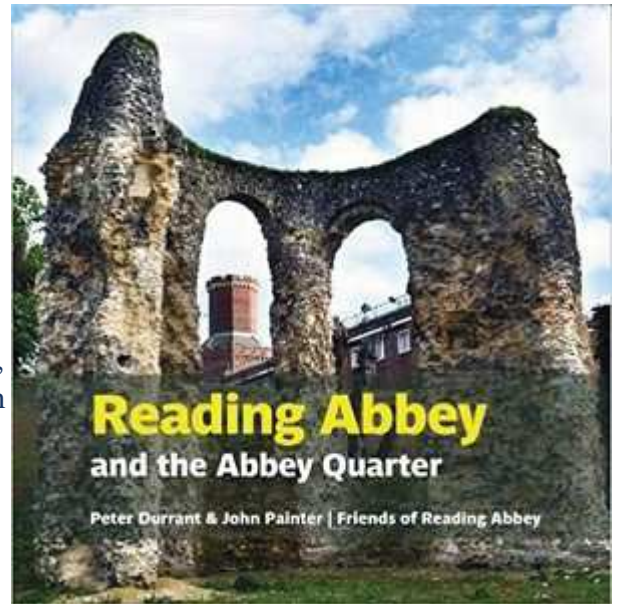
During the Civil War, however, further destruction came to the abbey site - Reading being a strategic location. Holes were made in the walls for gun ports, a mound was put for another large gun on land on the north side. At the end of the war, the land returned to the Crown's ownership, and became a "delightful romantic ruin for 150 years".

Now, St Laurence's church survives as a town church, and so does the hospitium - the civic buildings being extended with Alfred Waterhouse's 1870s designed town hall. Part of the site was used to build a county jail in the 1780s, rebuilt in the 1840s, George Gilbert Scott being the architect. He was also responsible for rebuilding the abbey gateway - the council had taken over that and the land to the north (which they made a public open space as Forbury Gardens), but the arch collapsed soon after - the rebuilt arch looking as George Gilbert Scott thought it should have been. Unfortunately, for aesthetic reasons he put the drainpipes inside the building, and in 2010 they were found to have been leaking for a century

meaning expensive repairs were needed. Nearby, St James's Roman Catholic church was built in 1837 - 40 in Romanesque style, the architect being Augustus Pugin. Inside, the font is formed of a stone from the chancel of the abbey church.

By 2009, the ruins had to be closed on safety grounds, as there was a risk of large stones falling from the remaining structures. Once a solution had been found, and a Heritage Lottery Fund grant secured, the abbey grounds could be reopened in 2018. Alongside that, a 'hidden abbey project' has been using ground penetrating radar to discover what remains below the former prison car park

The grounds now form a pleasant peaceful setting in the town, with information boards to explain what can be seen, whilst the book mentioned is available at Reading Museum and local bookshops. A lot more information and pictures can be found at the Friends of Reading Abbey website at <http://readingabbey.org.uk/>



---

The Society's planned programme is at [www.wargravehistory.org.uk/](http://www.wargravehistory.org.uk/) - where the latest information can be found.