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The Berkshire Echo

July 2021

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WHAT'S ON

Where Smooth Waters Glide

Take a look at our fantastic online exhibition on the history of the River Thames to mark 250 years of caring for the river at thames250exhibition.com

From the Editor

Welcome to the Summer edition of the Berkshire Echo where we take a look into the history of Reading Abbey as it celebrates its 900th anniversary this year. The abbey was founded in June 1121 by Henry I and became one of the richest and most important religious institutions of medieval England. Pilgrims travelled to Reading to see the hand of St James, a relic believed to have miraculous powers. The abbey also has a place in the history of both music and the English language, as it is believed to be the place where the song 'Summer is icumen in' was composed in the 13th century – the first known song in English.

The Abbey's wealth and power did not necessarily sit well within Reading's townfolk. In Abbey versus Town we learn that there was conflict over who could control shops, stalls and the market between the 13th and 15th centuries. They even came to blows over it!

When the Abbey's founder, Henry I, died in Normandy in 1136, his body was brought from there to be buried in front of the high altar in the abbey church. Unfortunately, as we discover in 'Hammer and chisel': Reading Abbey after the Dissolution, his coffin was not handled very well later in the nineteenth century.

But how did it come to pass that the resting place of a Royal was treated this way? Well, it stems from another royal – Henry VIII. After declaring himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1534, Henry VIII disbanded monasteries across England, Wales and Ireland. The Dissolution of the Monasteries, as it is more widely known, took place between 1536 and 1540. For Reading Abbey, this meant it was literally taken apart and stones were used to repair bridges and make buildings.

We hope that you enjoy this edition of the Echo. Remember to check out what's new to the archives and if you want to discover even more documents relating to Reading Abbey, take a look at our new webpage: [Reading Abbey](http://ReadingAbbey.org.uk).

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

Top: 'A South Prospect of the Abbey Gate at Reading', by Michael Angelo Rooker (c.1743-1801)
After a drawing by Paul Sandby (1731-1809) (D/EX2807/37/11)



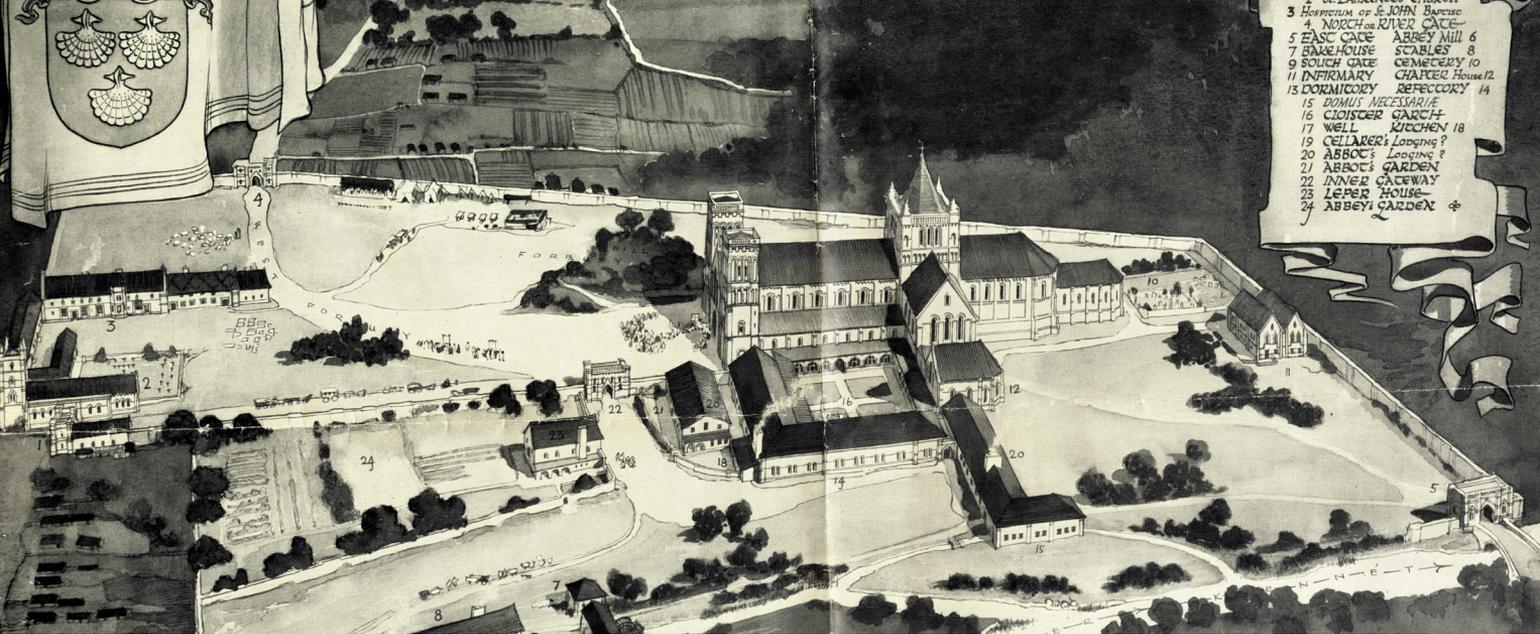
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Top: Reading Abbey as it may have looked, as depicted in the 20th century by W.M. Kessey (D/EX257/2/14)

Abbey versus town

Reading Abbey dominated the town and affected many aspects of life for ordinary people, until the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538. The abbey site occupied over 30 acres. Many properties in the town belonged to the abbey, including the mills and the guildhall, and (as owners of the manor of Reading) the town's open spaces. It came into conflict with the Merchant Gild, the predecessor of the borough council, a group of local businessmen who resented the power of the abbot. Allegedly, in the 1250s, the Reading men 'lay in wait' for the bailiffs and servants of the abbot and attacked them with weapons. As tensions rose, the burgesses acquired their first charter from Henry III in 1253, which cost them the enormous sum of £100 (roughly equivalent to over £70,000 today). This did not settle all disputed matters, and in 1254 they came to an agreement in court. The abbot conceded the burgesses' right to hold a corn market. The burgesses conceded that the abbot could choose the warden of the gild merchant [predecessor of the mayor], and that the abbot should receive payments from gild members for the right to trade in the town. The key of the gildhall was to be kept by the warden, except when the abbot or his bailiff was presiding over the court there.

This 'final' agreement proved to be nothing of the sort. In the 1480s, the abbot had allegedly failed to appoint a mayor or master of the gild for several years, so the burgesses made their own election of Richard Cleche in 1487.

Brought to court by the abbot in c.1498, Cleche defended his appointment of Thomas Carpenter and William Netter as constables because the previous Christmas had seen some unruly behavior in Reading, both day and night "mysruled peple dayly encreased and contynued as carders, disers, hasardars, vacabonds and mony oder onlawfull gamys". Accused of breaking the town stocks, Cleche said the abbey-appointed keeper of the keys had refused to hand them over to his men, resulting in new locks, bolts and keys needing to be made.

When Henry VIII issued regulations for the important clothmaking industry in Reading in 1520, the abbot was authorized to appoint the person responsible for officially marking all Reading-made cloths. Disagreements persisted, including squabbles over control of the shops and stalls known as the Flesh Shambles or Out-butcherly (in what is now Broad Street). An agreement was finally reached by arbitration in 1525, allowing the mayor and burgesses to peaceably occupy the premises without interruption by the abbot; and allowing the sale of meat in new buildings on the site, but paying rent to the abbot.

However, Reading Abbey's wealth and power could not protect it when Henry VIII broke with Rome. The last abbot, Hugh of Faringdon, opposed the king's actions, and he and two monks were executed for treason outside the abbey in November 1539. Most of the abbey's secular roles were transferred to the borough by royal charters, and its vast estates were sold.

Sources: R/IC2/1; 3/1; R/AL1; R/Z3/2





Hammer and chisel: Reading Abbey after the Dissolution

The abbey church and many of the other buildings began to be demolished in 1549 by the orders of the Duke of Somerset, uncle of Edward VI. The stained glass windows were sold; the monks' choir stalls were bought by the churchwardens of St Mary's church for reuse there, and some of the stone was also used to rebuild the church. Elizabeth I's charter to Reading Borough in 1560 gave the mayor and burgesses authority to use stones from the abbey ruins to repair bridges, and some were taken for new buildings at Windsor Castle. In the late 18th century the Abbey Gateway was used as a small private girls' school (famously attended by the young Jane Austen).

Reading Prison and St James' Catholic Church were among the new buildings on parts of the original abbey site in the 19th century, but threats to the ruins' survival also led to exciting archaeological discoveries. In the 1880s, William Silver Darter recalled an incident from when as a child in 1810 where he "saw a lot of the prisoners, dressed in yellow and blue, digging round a tall piece of the Ruins with the evident intention of pulling it down. They brought horses from the timber carriages close by, & with strong chains tried hard to remove it". These convict labourers were building a road to a school recently erected within the abbey walls, when they discovered a stone coffin "supposed to be that of Henry 1st. Unfortunately the clumsy fellows broke the stone in two". Darter remembered the coffin as having ornamental columns three inches thick; it was kept for some years in the school but was damaged by visitors anxious for a memento. The surviving fragments were then fixed in the walls of the south transept, with part of a Tudor fireplace from the old abbot's lodging.

On 27 December 1832 John Richards junior, a Reading lawyer, wrote to a London friend, "the hammer & chisel are busily engaged in destroying the greater portion of the ruins of the Abbey". Wild rumours circulated as to the discovery of coins, but Richards explained, "two of them I saw, & they were placed there in the first place by the workmen, being disfigured halfpence!".

Two skeletons were found a little to the north of the body of the church, and a letter of 6 February 1833 reports the discovery of another skeleton "at the summit of the outer bank of the earthwork". On 20 March Richards reported a recent visit to the excavations, when "they had discovered the floor of the south transept, formed of the small paving tiles hardly any of which were perfect from an immense mass of wall having fallen upon & literally smashed them". A letter of 29 April 1833 noted the alleged discovery of "a small image of the Hindoo [sic] deity Krishna, said to have been found amongst the ruins of Reading Abbey". All the new discoveries were ascribed to local surveyor Francis Hawker, who was hoping to confirm the boundaries of the abbey church for his map of Reading. A fine piece of monumental carving discovered in 1835 (known as the Reading Abbey Stone) was moved to St James' Catholic Church to be used as a font.

The Forbury, an open space which formed part of the abbey complex, was used for military defences in the Civil War, and for parades and fairs. Reading people used it to play games such as cricket, trapball and quoits. In the 18th century it was controversially appropriated by Reading School as a playground and cricket pitch for their sole use. 'Boyish riots' or fights between the privileged pupils and the local youth reminded older residents of their lost rights, and a mass trespass by several hundred Reading men occurred to play cricket in the summer of 1813. The Forbury and the abbey ruins were acquired by Reading Board of Health in the 1850s, and turned into a public garden and 'pleasure ground'. In 1886 it was chosen as the site of the Maiwand Lion, a memorial to men from the Royal Berkshire Regiment killed in Afghanistan in 1880; and the Berkshire War Memorial was erected there in 1932.

Today the Reading Abbey ruins can be accessed by all and you can find out more about it online: readingabbeyquarter.org.uk

Sources: R/AS2/2/2; R/D134/3; R/ES19/16; R/IC1/8; D/EX2556/1/13; 2/3

Top left: Sheep grazing in the ruins of Reading Abbey in the 18th century (D/EZ27/Z8)
Top right: 18th century tourists in the ruined Great Hall of the abbey (D/EZ27/Z8)





New to the Archives



From the Caribbean to Reading antiquarian

We have acquired the papers collected by the Revd J M Guilding (1830-1898), vicar of Reading St Mary (D/EX2556). Born in St Vincent in the Grenadines, he devoted much of his life to researching the history of Reading. The most exciting of the documents in his collection are letters from an earlier Reading antiquarian, John Richards, about excavations at Reading Abbey and the discovery of the Roman city of Silchester in 1832-1833.

We are pleased to have completed work on the papers of the Revd Peter Ditchfield of Barkham (1854-1930), a keen amateur historian who was one of the editors of the Victoria County History of Berkshire (R/D134). Of special interest are the records of the Forbury (Maiwand) Memorial Fund and Berkshire War Memorial Committee, 1887-1947; and letters from members of the Dawson family fighting on the British side in the American Revolutionary War in the 1780s.

Other local historians of the period were H T Morley of Reading and Stephana Coles of Beedon (R/D135). Morley's papers include a photograph of tourists at the Sphinx in Egypt in 1890, and a plan reconstructing Reading Abbey. One of Stephana's correspondents noted of a visit to the Bodleian Library in 1934, "there was no difficulty ... except that of finding the man who knew where to find the man who knew where the documents were". She also possessed the memoir of a 19th century vicar of Beedon, who recalled a keen family of nonconformists who prayed embarrassingly loudly in the street for his conversion to their views. The papers of Ernest Dormer of Reading (D/EX2557) also include some records of the Wheble family's estate, 1833-1888.

Nightmare at school

A small artificial collection relating mainly to Caversham and Reading, 18th century-1926, is believed to have been collected by architect William Wing (D/EX2562). It includes the memorandum book of the parish clerk of Caversham, 1819-1835; a record of oral testimony of the Caversham parish stocks and pound in the 19th century; and memories of the 'nightmare' of life as a pupil at Oakley House School, Caversham, a small private institution, in c.1876.

Saints and cinemas: new records for building history

We have purchased some medieval deeds for land in Binfield, 1467 (D/EZ200/1); and Winkfield, 1382 (D/EZ197).

The Binfield deed is especially interesting as it is dated by the rarely used feast day of St Richard the Confessor, also known as St Richard of Wessex or St Richard of Lucca, who was a relatively obscure 8th century king of Wessex.

One small collection comprises deeds of cottages in Lambourn, 1886, properties in Newbury, 1724-1907, including the Quaker meeting house and burial ground, 1802, and farms and houses in Thatcham, 1703-1948 (D/EX2221). Another small collection includes a lovely sale catalogue for Sunningdale Park, including its private cinema room, 1946; the diary of the verger at Warfield Church, 1936-1937; and deeds of property in Winkfield, 1867-1985 (D/EX2535).

Tin hats

Records of the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH) of Reading 'Windy Corner' Shellhole, 1928-n.d. [20C], show how some WWI veterans were able to rediscover the friendship of the trenches and give back to the community by assisting voluntary and charitable organisations (D/EX2496). The Reading 'Shellhole' was the first branch to be formed on home soil.

Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9, Fri 9-4.30.
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