

# READING CIVIC SOCIETY

Update to Members by email 22 Oct 2020

## This edition covers;

1. Planning matters (Drews, Reading Gas Holder, 43 London Street, Dukesbridge House),
2. Missing sculptures and a blue plaque,
3. Mr Mayor's activities,
4. High Streets Heritage Action Zone Oxford Road funding,
5. Conservation and Urban Design Officer Appointed by RBC,
6. Berkshire Family History Society events,
7. The Mills Archive - a job vacancy in the Heritage Sector. The Mills Archive, Reading,
8. Pointers from the Friends of Reading Abbey.
9. Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day events in Reading.

## 1. Planning

### Former Drews building on Caversham Road (see also last email update).

On Wednesday 7 October the Planning Applications Committee unanimously rejected the planning application which would have led to the demolition of the former Drews building on 71-73 Caversham Road and its replacement with 44 flats, some affordable. The rationale for refusal was due to concerns about the loss of the locally listed heritage asset and the height of the proposed seven-storey building.

A very experienced Planning Officer had recommended approval, judging the benefits outweighed the loss of heritage etc. However Councillors had concerns about scale of the building and the precedent approval would set. This building having only been added to the Local List in February 2020 it is very reassuring that councillors took this into account in their decision process. Some councillors took the view that the green elements were good and liked the design of the proposed building.

The Reading Chronicle article may be seen [HERE](#), extracts are:

Councillor Tony Page, lead member for Planning at RBC, slammed the developer for ***“belittling” the building and “exaggerating the difficulties of retaining its external features”***. ***The agent for the applicant, said it would be “practically impossible” to retain the building and bring forward a plan including affordable housing***

***and that the building has “effectively come to the end of its natural life”***. Councillor Karen Rowland, lead member for Heritage, said ***“...the building could easily be converted into housing and converting warehouses is “quite the trend across the country” the building is a “rare child” in Reading because other malting buildings have been lost.”***

Some councillors however are reported to have praised the design of the proposed seven-storey building. However it was judged to be too tall for the area and would have an overbearing impact. Councillor Tony Page, lead member for Planning said ***“whatever is approved on this site “will set the benchmark” for adjoining planned developments, with similar size developments likely to follow.”***

Design is however subjective.

- You may take the view that it is totally uninspiring box which could be found anywhere in the UK and has no local distinctiveness. A debate on what is “Reading” in building form then follows.
- You may take the view that Reading needs more modern buildings like this.

There does however seem to be a fundamental flaw in a process which requires a sound Planning Officer to work on the submitted application, doubtless working with the Applicant and influencing the design at the Pre Application stage, for it then to hit the buffers at the Planning Committee when Councillors’ take an extremely different balance of judgement. A victory for no one.

The developer may appeal or submit a proposal which is lower. The Planning Application stated that they did not believe that conversion of the existing old building was practical / financially viable.

Inevitably other applications will come forward for the sites to the west side of Caversham Road (which includes the Fire Station, the music shop and the Gym, the Shurgard Self Storage building and the Carters site). RBC needs to develop a design and height code for the sites to define what is acceptable and thus save everyone time, effort and money.

### Reading Gas Holder

A planning application was approved in 2019 to replace Reading’s remaining unused gas holder with flats and a small number of houses. The developer’s recent application for permission to demolish the gas holder has been refused by the council as the application did not include a comprehensive Risk Assessment. In particular the proposal is said not to

## Dukesbridge House

have included details of plans to remove the contaminated soil. I understand when the last GHs were removed some of the contaminated soil was removed by canal boat but eventually it was decided to cap over the site and build over that. Inevitably a complex and expensive operation so why the application did not include a comprehensive RA is very hard to understand.

### 43 London Street

Some 18 months ago members of the Civic Soc, the CAAC and Cllr Rose Williams meet the new owner of 43 London Street (formerly a dentists and before that a pub) and his team. The aim was to help us to understand, at the Pre-Application stage, proposals to develop the site. We were able to give our feedback which helped to refine the design before the planning application was submitted.

The London Street building (Grade II) is narrow however the site goes back some way with some modern buildings and a car park. We thought the design proposed was of a high standard and innovative, the flats proposed were quite sensibly set out. We recognised it was a challenging site. It was a huge relief that a developer was willing to come forward with a sensitive development and that they wished to make a contribution to affordable housing. Planning consent was rightly given.

However Amanda Martin and I met the agent last week. He highlighted that the scheme took 18 months to gain approval (and wondering how that could be justified). Additionally slow admin by RBC's meant that key documents were not signed until 6 April 2020, well outside of the agreed timelines. This has resulted in £300K of additional costs being incurred, making a tight scheme unaffordable. The developers options as explained to us are; 1. Challenge RBC on the grounds of excessive and unnecessary delays and 2. To revise the planning application to add 3 further flats, adding height at the back of the site and not visible on London Street.



Above; Side view of the proposed development (to the right the existing London St buildings) to the left the tall block which will have a floor added (faintly outlined in red)

In our discussion we preferred by far sticking with the original design and scale. We could see however that if the challenge to RBC was not successful the additional units could be acceptable (their design impact was not significant) in extremis. The developer still plans to make the agreed affordable housing and to stick to the agreed quality of design

We also had a Pre- Application discussion with the same agent about this site.

This modern brick building, formerly offices, is the corner building by Duke St Bridge which runs along Duke Street and the Kennet waterside. It was bought by a London Company, Lipman Properties, 2-3 years ago.

<https://www.lipmanproperties.co.uk/about>

Using Permitted Development Rights the company has already started work to convert some the offices along Duke Street to small flats.

We have been in discussion over the last 2 years about ideas for the portion of the building where it abuts Duke St Bridge and runs alongside the Kennet. One proposal included a tall and innovative building with some interesting finishes, it was to house a hotel as well as the inevitable flats. The design idea was totally dismissed by the Planning Officers on height and design grounds. We thought it was "challenging" but had pros, though we had concerns about the impact on views in the Conservation Area.

The latest proposal is to convert the building to a mix of flats ( 20\*1 bed, 12\*2 and 2\*3), there will be some roof terraces. There will be significant work at the level by the Kennet to activate what is now a discouraging walkway and a café will be added. At the back security will be increased to prevent rough sleepers entering a car park area (which is a huge annoyance to the existing tenants) and to manage bin storage more effectively. Three floors will be added (each stepping back from the other) with the surface treatment being a naturally rusting metal finish.

Images of the redeveloped building with the added floors as seen from Duke St and the Kennet are below



It was interesting to hear a comment that "as the construction is cheaper, as are the materials, we don't have to go so high to cover our costs." The current proposal seems to have a relatively minor

impact on the key views in this Conservation Area. We were told the Planning Application will be made within the next few weeks. We will consider our views.

## 2. Missing Sculptures and Blue Plaque

### Adam Libby and Karen and Bagged



**Adam Libby and Karen** (ALK) is an “uninhibited” sculpture of 3 children playing in a private garden by Liz Mulchinok. It was commissioned by Laing Properties in 1983.

Originally sited in a small courtyard, between Minerva House and the Hospitium, it was removed in 2015

when Minerva House was redeveloped/updated. Encouraged by RCS and Cllr Page the developer donated the sculpture to RBC, it was placed in the museum store awaiting a new site.



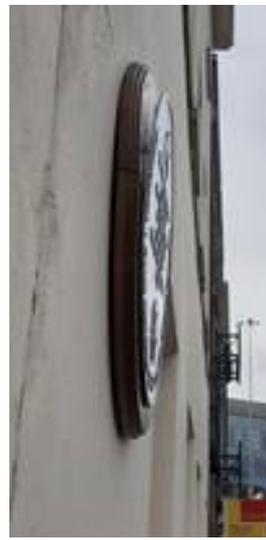
**Bagged** This sculpture (left) was removed from its site by Broad St Mall many years ago.

Last year I took the opportunity to remind Cllr Page that these sculptures continued to lounge in the store and asked if there was a plan. He responded with an understandable “we need to allocate funding”

In March 2020 Cllr Page wrote to me indicating the council had now secured some S106 funding which would be allocated to installing the sculptures in new sites. His letter suggested a few possible sites and sought our view on location options. Our response has drawn on a consultation we undertook with members about possible future sites for ALK in 2017 and feedback from CADRA, the Bell Tower Association, Friends of CCG & members of the CAAC. We await a formal proposal about siting from RBC.

### Blue Plaque to Phoebe Cusden

Erected on Talbot House, Castle St, in 2018 the costs were funded by the Reading Dusseldorf Association, Reading Civic Society and members of the family. RBC kindly funded the erection for us.



Late last year we noticed that the wooden base for the plaque had started to warp slightly with the damp and was pushing the blue plaque forward, see image below. The risk is that someone with mischief in mind will pull the plaque off, being opposite the “cop shop” is no guarantee of safety. Kerry Renshaw and I have approached a builder to work up a more permanent solution. It is anticipated there will be a

minor cost to fix this which RBC have offered to cover.

## 3. From the Mayor of Reading’s Facebook.

The Mayor, Cllr David Stevens says

*“Recently I met with local historian John Mullaney to discuss the Coronation of the Virgin Stone on display at Reading Museum. This is part 1 in a series of talks arranged by the Friends of Reading Abbey to explore the history of this important site in the run up to the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Abbey.”* To watch, please visit – [HERE](#)



**The Paul Robeson exhibition**

The Mayor has recently visited Reading Museum to unveil the portrait of the black civil rights pioneer, actor and musical virtuoso Paul Robeson which is part of a display at the Museum celebrating Black History Month. It is part of a major project developed by the National Portrait Gallery called Coming Home. Find out more from the Mayor’s Facebook page [HERE](#)

The museum’s blog about this is [HERE](#) The Amanda referred to is Civic Society member Amanda Martin who discovered an image of Paul Robson at the Town Hall. Amanda tells us separately that in 1959 she saw Paul Robeson play Othello in Stratford with Sam Wanamaker as Iago and comments that it was “Surprisingly enterprising for a school trip”.

## 4. High Streets Heritage Action Zone Funding

RBC has been awarded just over £9K from Historic England, to initiate four 'Community Story Telling' activities focussed around the Oxford Road in west Reading.

RBC has appointed two people (part time) to its High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) team. ***"They will work with partners, including Reading University, and will look to engage with Oxford Road area communities to explore people's real stories of the area to amplify the local heritage and rich multicultural history of the road."*** The plans include;

- 1.The Oxford Road Storyboard – focusing on identifying "Who we are" as a theme that brings to light all the fabulous stories along the Oxford Road;
- 2.Oxford Road shop window art gallery – bringing together local communities, shop keepers and local artists to re-imagine shop fronts and other parts of the high street as gallery and spaces;
- 3.A Story-telling promenade performance along the Oxford Road (also filmed and shared online);
4. Creative and inventive Covid public safety artwork interventions which link to both heritage and the Oxford Road businesses.

Thanks to Evelyn Williams we have highlighted that some of this work was undertaken several years ago by the Museum, and volunteers, and that in some instances just an update may be required.

## 5. Conservation and Urban Design Officer (CUDO) Appointed.

In September a full time CUDO joined the staff of RBC. Bruce Edgar. We have yet to meet him, he has probably been inundated with requests from RBC colleagues, and work. Evelyn Williams has invited him to take part in a Conservation Area Advisory Committee meeting in the near future.

This is a significant improvement in resources. For several years Reading has hired in the existing Heritage Consultant Jonathan Mullis for one day a week, despite his best efforts there was only so much which could be done in a day. We presume the services of Mr Mullis have now been curtailed.

## 6. Berkshire Family History Society Events

Jan Brown of the BFHS sends me fliers in the hope that their events which might be of interest to members. The links to the events, and how to book, are provided below:-

- 22 October John Painter– Secretary of the Friends of Reading Abbey will give a talk about the Abbey.

<https://berksfhs.org/events/reading-abbey-online-talk/>

- 31 October – Beginning your Family History by Peter Bevan

<https://berksfhs.org/events/beginning-your-family-history-online-talk/>

- 5 November Living through the English Civil War by Catherine Sampson.

<https://berksfhs.org/events/living-through-the-english-civil-war-online-talk/>

Tickets are £5 each but there is a discount for all three booked together.

- 19 November The history of the Fair Mile Hospital, Cholsey by County Archivist Mark Stevens

<https://berksfhs.org/events/the-fair-mile-hospital-online-talk/>

## 7. Job vacancy in the Heritage Industry

One of my roles is Hon Sec of the Watlington House Trust in Reading. One of our tenants is the Mills Archive Trust, everything you ever would want to know about Milling and then more. <https://new.millsarchive.org> . They received the Queens Award for Voluntary Service in 2019.



Their Director, Liz Bartram, tells me they are recruiting for a new role, that of Development Manager. To quote Liz ***"The Development Manager will be responsible for growing income to cover core costs and allow for sustainable growth. The ideal person will be passionate about heritage and be a strategic thinker"***. It is a permanent post, based in a Grade II\* building in central Reading, the pay range is £25,00-£27,500 per annum depending on experience. The link which follows takes you to the job advert on the Guardian Jobs website <https://jobs.theguardian.com/job/7098960/development-manager/?TrackID=8>

Please feel free to share the information if you know people who you think might be interested.

## 8. A few pointers from the Friends of Reading Abbey, thanks to John Painter, are below

### Twilight Trail

A reminder that Reading Borough Council, Reading UK and the Reading BID have come together this year to create a Christmas light trail

in the Forbury Gardens and Abbey Ruins. This is the *Twilight Trail*, a 'stunning, safe and socially distanced experience that will transform the beautiful Abbey Ruins and Forbury Gardens' over the Christmas period, from Tuesday 8 December until Sunday 3 January. As with all events nowadays, you need to book; the hyperlink below gives more details and a link to the booking agency.

<https://livingreading.co.uk/reading-announces-first-twilight-trail>

### **Celebrating our Town - Discover Reading**

The Reading Guild of Artists is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. Below is a link to the RGA's anniversary online exhibition, which includes a number of images of the Abbey Ruins, including the exhibition's promotional picture, a view of The Blade from the Dormitory. The whole exhibition is well worth viewing.

<http://www.rga-artists.org.uk/online-exhibition.html>

### **Green Flag Award 2020**

The Forbury Gardens and Caversham Court Gardens have both received Green Flag awards this year. Below is the Council press release giving more details.

<https://www.reading.gov.uk/news/green-flag-awards-for-two-of-readings-most-popular-green-spaces/>

Green Flag Awards for two of Reading's most popular green spaces

Reading Borough Council. Two of our most popular open spaces have once again been recognised as among the best in the country after receiving Green Flag and Green Heritage Site awards.

[www.reading.gov.uk](http://www.reading.gov.uk)

## **9. Remembrance Day and Armistice Day Services in Reading**

Inevitably the CV19 nightmare has curtailed the usual scale of such events and in particular the scale of the Civic component.

At the moment I understand the plan is that there will be a Civic service at the War Memorial in The Forbury on Remembrance Day, however it will be restricted to 15 invited guests. It is unlikely that spectators will be encouraged.

We are planning a service at the Trooper Potts VC / Berkshire Yeomanry Memorial on Armistice Day which is restricted to 6 guests.

Sadly therefore it will not be as we were in 2018, below. .



I understand that Reading Minster plans to hold appropriate services on each day but these will not be the usual Civic events. Details will doubtless be posted on the Minster website in due course.

Richard  
Richard Bennett DL  
Chair Reading Civic Society  
21/10/2020