



READING CIVIC SOCIETY

27 January 2021

This newsletter is an update to members who are not on Email. It includes the abbreviated contents of email updates on 24 +28 December & 13 January

Email Newsletter 24 December 900th Anniversary of the foundation of Reading Abbey.

Both Reading Borough Council and Reading UK CIC (Living Reading) are developing plans to celebrate this very significant anniversary. Despite the position on CV 19 the Council is still planning that the focus of its celebrations will be at Reading Water Fest, on Saturday 19 June.

A date to put in your diary and to hope that it is possible.

Living Reading (Reading UK CIC) have recently launched a promotional video about Reading Abbey 900, which you can also find on YouTube;

<https://livingreading.co.uk/visit/heritage-and-history/reading-abbey-900>

The Council has also set up a web page promoting Reading Abbey 900 follow the link to it:

<https://www.readingabbeyquarter.org.uk/visit/2021-900th-abbey-anniversary>

Reading Museum

Crowd funder to raise £6,000. The museum's target to raise £6,000 target within 35 days was exceeded with £6,207 being contributed by 121 supporters.

The funds will assist Reading Museum to create digital opportunities for school children to enjoy the experience of a visit to the museum from their classroom

Mathew Williams from the museum offers a few items which might be of interest to members;

"Virtual Reading Room":

<https://collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/2020/09/22/stillspecial-virtual-reading-room-launch/>

A new presence on Google Arts and Culture:

<https://collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/2020/09/08/university-of-reading-special-collections-on-google-arts-culture/>

Old films of Old Coley.

On the **History and Events of Old Coley** Facebook page Joe Doak and Graham Turner have been posting some old films and slide shows of Reading in the past, several put together by Doug Noyes. They are quite fascinating and test your memory. Reading Civic Society members have certainly seen some of these in the distant past:

- a. [Doug Noyes on Thames TV \(10\) Doug Noyes Interview - Thames TV 1997 - YouTube](#)
- b. The first part of a "Trip around the IDR click on this link [Facebook](#)
- c. The Second part of a "Trip around the IDR" click on this link [Facebook](#)
- d. The final part of a "Trip around the IDR - click on this link [Facebook](#)
- e. The changing Face of Reading [The Changing Face of Reading - Friar Street to Broad Street - YouTube](#)
- f. [Smiths Coaches – Reading \(10\) Smith's Coaches at Rose Kiln Lane in the 1940s - YouTube](#)
- g. [Smiths Coaches Reading \(10\) 'Smith's Coaches at Mill Lane' by Smiths Coaches - Circa 1946 - YouTube](#)
- h. [Reading in the 1940s filmed by Smiths Coaches \(1\) History And Events Of Coley Reading | Facebook](#)

Planning

We have been engaged in a number of On Line Planning discussions with developers in the last few weeks. Interesting the degree of interest there is now in hotels in the centre of Reading.

Two are already approved (firstly in Hosier Street and then No 1 Reading, a 23 storey building opposite the Malmaison Hotel in Station Road).

Other schemes coming forward shortly include the Bristol and West Arcade and two others in the very centre, they are all within 200 yards of each other. Good to see that there is such an interest in bringing people to Reading.

The team behind the **Bristol and West Arcade** scheme held Reading's first Digital Publication last week. Unfortunately only 8 people took part in 2 separate sessions.

This does indicate the difficulty there will be with the Govt's vision in the White Paper to rely on Digital engagement on Planning proposals and to ditch developers undertaking physical events.

We have made an offer to one of the other groups to host their Public Exhibition when they are ready in the New Year and would hope we might gain some greater traction than that. More of that in the New Year.

Developments at the University's Thames Valley Science Park Hollywood comes to Berkshire.

It has been announced that some 3,000 jobs will be created when Shinfield Studios Hollywood opens a new UK arm in Shinfield. [Hollywood in Shinfield: 3,000 jobs expected in £200 million scheme to create blockbusting films and dramas in Wokingham borough - Wokingham.Today](#)

This follows the announcement in 2019 of plans by the British Museum for a major storage facility on this site. The museum has announced the move which will see the majority of the 2 million historical treasures it holds at Blythe House in West Kensington transferred.

High Street Heritage Action Zone

During the year Reading BC was one of 68 councils to be successful in bidding for a High Street Heritage Action Zone. [Reading High Streets Heritage Action Zone - Reading Borough Council](#)

The funding award from Historic England is nearly £897,000. RBC will match that with cash, staff time and volunteer effort. The streets include; Market Place and London

Street, St Mary Butts / Castle Street and Oxford Road to Reading West Railway Bridge.

Despite all the challenges caused by the Pandemic two PT staff members have been recruited to cover Conservation matters and Community Engagement. A pilot grant of £9,300 has been awarded to undertake initial work along Oxford Road.

The project has opportunities for volunteers to work in the next phase. Volunteers are being recruited through Reading Museum's/MERL's volunteer programme.

Seven **Conservation Volunteers** have been recruited to support the physical intervention strand of the project. This element of the work will concentrate on restoring and repairing buildings and improving the public realm.

Email Newsletter 28 December 2020

I am sure you are familiar with the poem

**Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;**

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;

This year in Reading on the "night before Christmas" our two MPs Matt Rodda MP and the Rt Hon Aloc Sharma MP crept quietly out onto the streets in Santa disguise putting a message into the stockings hung on the chimney

"The MoJ has offered to give RBC the opportunity to make a community bid for the Reading Gaol site before they consider offers from developers."

Sadly they did this on Social media so we did not see them "flying through the air" beards and red cloaks waving in the wind.

Matt and Aloc have been working together on this for some time.

The decision follows the withdrawal in November of the preferred bidder Artisan Real Estate.

It is interesting to see some of the feedback on Social Media. A lot positive but some mixed. Several are concerned about funding and in particular that RBC should not take funds from other services (support to children and the elderly), that swimming pools should come first and could they not build a swimming pool in there (Note;1. I think there might just be some ancient ruins there 2. Planning applications have very recently been submitted to build new pools at Palmer Park and at Rivermead, where it is also proposed to replace the existing Leisure Centre).

I hear it suggested, not from Council sources, that the successful bidder (now withdrawn) was for £10M and the plan was for a Hotel. That the under-bidder was round £5M and that perhaps RBC bid was close to £1.

I would imagine any under-bidder would inevitably now wish to re-examine their bid, downwards.

The MoJ have agreed a period of exclusivity until 15 March 2021, to allow Reading Borough Council to develop a business case with local partners. Quite a challenge to pull this off in 2 ½ months. In my days as a Civil Servant we used to be able to include in balancing financial judgements not just hard cash but also the financial evaluation of the other benefits which might accrue from a project, I would have thought that a valuation of the wider but softer benefits would be significant.

The council I think has always recognised that their vision would require them to work with partners to identify the additional funding to deliver what they have in mind. Also I am sure it would be far better for the Council to be engaging positively with partners rather than having to battle Developers mad ideas through the planning process.

The restrictions of the site (the Abbey ruins) will probably constrain any new build to the site of the 1970s building which holds the exercise facility.

Whilst all the talk has been about a Cultural venue in order to generate the funding to refurbish and maintain there will have to be a mixed use site, including inside the old building. The restoration of Thames Lido shows how a mix of uses is required to generate a variety of cash flows to make historic building conversions work financially.

On its own as Cultural / museum use it would probably be bankrupt in a month. Restaurants/cafes etc on the ground floor, upper floors converted to cultural spaces, hotel use, apartments, small offices for start-ups and so on.

So if you know any benevolent people who might be willing to support this project with significant funding or companies with the local interest willing to get involved do let Cllr Page know.

It will be fascinating to see how this pans out.

Email Newsletter 13 January

Planning.

Reading Gaol

You may remember from my update at the end of December about the MOJ providing a window, until mid March, for RBC to put together a Community bid for the Gaol, recognising that it would have to work with partners to do so.

An article on UK Property Forums expands on this [Council plots to make gaol plan come true | UK Property Forums](#). Undoubtedly leaders of the council will be working hard on this to develop a way forward. It is to be expected that companies will be interested in working in partnership to deliver something which is an asset to the town and which is financially viable going forward. The council is after all not funded to restore, and run, such a site from the Rates. Compromises will doubtless have to be struck.

Public Exhibitions about Proposed Major Planning proposals.

In mid-December I let members know about two On Line public exhibition events about plans for the Bristol and West Arcade, which will become a hotel, and the former Coopers Arms on the Market Place, which will be restored and used as residential units above the ground floor. We also highlighted the events on various social media sites. Disappointingly only 8 people took part in the 2 presentations.

In January we have another potentially more interesting consultation. This time it covers

proposals for 1-15 Queen Victoria Street and 146-147 Friar Street and 2-8 Queen Victoria Street.



Some committee members received a brief from the company in December. The plan is to restore these Grade II listed buildings, to make more unified the retail facing of the shops, to use the upper floors for an “apart hotel” and to create a useable area behind the buildings which may be used for shops and pop up events and will be accessible via the restored building on Friar St (white building above). The Ward Councillors and the new Conservation Officer have had their input and shaped the application somewhat but seem happy with it in principle. Overall we thought it quite sensible but made some suggestions.

It looks to be an interesting scheme with lots going for it.

The website to view is [Queen's Yard \(queenvictoriastreet.co.uk\)](http://queenvictoriastreet.co.uk)

The building owners also own 3 other significant corner buildings in central Reading.

39 Brunswick Hill.

After yet another rejection of proposals for this building by the Planning Inspector we have yet another inappropriate planning application for this Edwardian building. No 201843

“Conversion of existing dwelling and two storey side and part three/part single storey rear extensions to provide 8 flats with associated parking and amenity space and demolition of existing garage”.

We will look at this carefully. The title is hardly encouraging and suggests little difference from the last application.

Restoration of the Dog Fountain Application number - 201851

This fountain on the wall of St Laurence Church was restored many years ago and the water started to flow again. It was however damaged again and the water turned off.

The application is to:

Restore damaged stonework and clean the drinking fountain. The works are to repair vandalized stone elements using like for like materials. The material to be used is Ancaster Hard White a tight grained limestone from Lincolnshire.

I have yet to explore the planning application but it sounds encouraging. All we have to do is to stop RBC leaving refuse bags next to it!

Phoebe Cusden Blue Plaque in Castle Street.

This was erected in 2018 by RCS and the Reading Dusseldorf Association. It was set on a wooden base of oak (we later found out that it was originally the top of a stool). Weather played its part and the base started to warp and push the plaque away. It was therefore removed in December. After undertaking some discussions with our builder and undertaking some research we have decided to re-instate it with a base of Slate from Snowdonia. RBC have offered to pay for this.

High Street Heritage Action Zones.

These include; Oxford Road to Reading West Bridge, Market Place & London Street and St Mary Minster – Castle Street. Reading BC has around £1.8M of funding to undertake work to improve these streets. To PT members of staff have been recruited to focus on Conservation and Community Engagement.

Initial work has started on Oxford Road with:

Searching for 3 artists to develop projects which will take place by the end of March 2021 (each artist will be funded to £1,800) [Artist Call out](#)

Asking people to share their stories of Oxford Road – for more info [Share your stories of Oxford Road](#)

What to go looking for on those Keep Fit Walks around Reading?

Reading Chronicle before Christmas Tevye Markson of the Reading Chronicle asked if we could provide a list of Blue Plaques which people could go looking for on their walks around Reading. Reading has very few Blue Plaques, it has a couple of Red ones and some plain. We therefore provided information which included information boards and also a link to the Potts VC website which lists the many sculptures around town; [Reading Sculptures on the Potts VC Memorial Site](#)

Inevitably we missed a few, 2 in Caversham and one in the Baker Street area at least. I have been told there are more on the University London Street Campus but have yet to research this.

The article may be seen [The markers that help explore Reading's hidden history - Berkshire Live \(getreading.co.uk\)](#)

Reading Culture Live has now drawn together input from many sources to provide such guidance.

<https://whatsonreading.com/existing-walking-routes-reading>

<https://whatsonreading.com/exploring-readings-heritage-while-you-walk/reading-landmarks-and-more-walking-inspiration>

Berkshire Family History Society have upcoming events.

18 February
Reading 1740-1800 by Joan Dills

11 February
Upper Thames Patrol by Bill King

6 March
Arrival of the Railways in Reading by Richard Mark

The talks are held between 2 -3:15 pm.

Booking via <https://berksfhs.org/>

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