

# *Reading Abbey Revealed* Evaluation Report

December 2021



*Reading Twilight Trail 2020*

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## Executive Summary

First conceived by Reading Museum (RM) and Reading Borough Council (RBC) in 2010, *Reading Abbey Revealed* secured a £1.77m grant in December 2015 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). This was match-funded by the Council with £1.37m.

The historically significant and much-loved Abbey Ruins and Abbey Gateway have now been conserved and re-opened to the public in June 2018 after almost ten years of closure.



*The Abbey Ruins*

With the pioneering use of innovative conservation techniques such as sedum planting to cap the walls and hot-mixed lime mortar to stabilise the walls, the project has rescued the Abbey Ruins for the people of Reading. Now made safe, secure and sustainable, the Ruins are open to the public once again and home to an exciting programme of open air events including theatre, cinema, music and community activity.

Reading now has a new historic quarter, the Abbey Quarter, which draws together and interprets the former grounds of Reading Abbey - the Ruins, Abbey Gateway, Reading Museum and Town Hall, Forbury Gardens and surrounding streets - as a single unified heritage site with a comprehensive interpretation scheme for the first time. An average of 687,700 per month walked through the Abbey Quarter area in 2021.

### ***Reading Abbey Revealed in numbers***

- A total of 350,429 people have been engaged in *Reading Abbey Revealed* since July 2016 - from the new *Story of Reading* gallery at Reading Museum and schools workshops in the Abbey Gateway to online visits to the Abbey Quarter website and a packed events and outreach programme.
- 45,320 people have attended a high quality and high impact programme of events in the Abbey Quarter. From the re-opening festival and onsite performances inspired by Reading's history in June 2018 to the recent Abbey 900, local people have enjoyed a range of free and exciting events celebrating Reading and its history.
- Local people are discovering more about Reading, Reading Abbey and its fascinating history - evaluation shows that 80% of talks, tours and events attendees said that they learned something new about the history of Reading and Reading Abbey.
- 4,327 school and university students, teachers, young people and adult learners have attended schools sessions (including a new Reading Abbey inspired 'Royals in Reading' workshop), INSET training, Take-Over days, Arts Awards, Youth Panel and conservation day-schools and workshops.
- 219 Victorian Schoolroom sessions have been held for 6,137 children and 803 adults - despite 18 months of Covid lockdown restrictions. The popular Victorian Schoolroom programme has been successfully relocated from the Museum to the restored Abbey Gateway, adding an atmospheric and experiential space for the sessions.
- 58 virtual workshops were offered during the 2020-21 academic year, with 1,766 pupils participating. Since autumn 2020, 43 virtual Victorian Schoolroom sessions have engaged 1,165 children and 59 adults. As a consequence of Covid restrictions, the Learning team took the opportunity to gain new skills and to adapt their offer to develop online 'virtual' workshops to continue the museum's unique offer for schools and subsequently extend their reach.
- Through consultation and input from local teachers and specialists, 4 new resources have been written and produced for schools to enable teachers to prepare and follow up sessions and to use on-site and off-site. They cover a range of topics from local and national history linked to the Royals in Reading to creative writing, dance and music.
- 20,698 people from across Reading have participated in Abbey on Wheels (now Museum on Wheels), the project's pop up display and virtual reality experience which took the Abbey Ruins out to festivals, libraries and community centres.
- 131 individual volunteers have been trained to support *Reading Abbey Revealed*, undertaking research, writing digital content, as heritage custodians, leading and supporting tours, acting as costumed interpreters, sewing costumes, helping at events, schools' sessions, outreach and gardening. 40 volunteers are actively involved on a regular basis and have continued to be engaged during Covid-19 restrictions. Since 2019 the Museums Partnership Reading joint working between Reading Museum and MERL has enabled shared management, training, organisation and record keeping processes.
- 6 paid interns have been employed, creating a successful model for internships and providing a positive starting point for young people embarking on their careers.





*School visit to the Abbey Ruins*

### ***Engaging local people with their heritage***

The success of the project has been grounded in extensive public consultation and support. Building on the consultation for the Activity Plan (where over 1,000 people responded to an online consultation survey), a series of events and Open Days, hard hat conservation tours, accessible talks, community outreach through Abbey on Wheels (now Museum on Wheels), interpretation testing and positive publicity all created an early groundswell of local support for the conservation and re-opening of the Abbey Ruins.

This led to high attendance at the opening and subsequent events - despite Covid-19 lockdowns - with a growing awareness of, and pride in, the importance of Reading's history. At the recent Abbey 900 celebration, 74% of people surveyed agreed that the event had helped to increase their pride in Reading.

Festivals, activities and events will continue to engage visitors with the heritage of the Abbey Ruins into the future, as will the continuing Museum on Wheels outreach programme - a real legacy of *Reading Abbey Revealed*.

### ***Heritage at the heart of Reading***

The growing sense of civic pride is reflected in the additional heritage impact that *Reading Abbey Revealed* has generated - the term 'Abbey Quarter' has been widely adopted by the town, similarly branded interpretation and signage has been rolled out around the town centre and the Abbey Quarter is now central to Reading's heritage tourist offer. It is an Ambassador for the 'Great West Way' initiative and in 2019 businesses voted to create a new Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District (BID) 2019 - 2024.

The impact of the Abbey Quarter scheme has been recognised through a number of prestigious awards such as the Royal Town Planning Institute 2018 South East Award for Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture and Planning Awards 2020 for the 'Best use of Heritage in Placemaking'.

This vision for the Abbey Quarter has been achieved through close working with partners such as the University of Reading and RBC departments and services such as highways, transport, parks and Reading Arts, as well as through strong cross party support.

Crucially to its success, *Reading Abbey Revealed* has been delivered by a strong and dedicated staff team with vision and commitment. New staff dedicated to the project also made a huge difference to what the team were able to deliver. The expertise of the team has been recognised in further successful funding applications.

The NLHF grant has acted as a catalyst for further funding and the team have attracted a further £1.7 million of additional grants from organisations such as the NLHF, Historic England and Arts Council England through Reading Place of Culture, the Cultural Recovery Fund and Emergency Heritage at Risk funds.

As a result of all this, the Abbey Ruins, Abbey Quarter and Reading Museum now sit firmly at the heart of Reading's cultural offer. Through conservation, interpretation and community collaboration, this ambitious project has reinvented the site and precinct of Reading Abbey as the town's main heritage destination.

*Reading Abbey Revealed* has given Reading a sense of place and pride - the town is more than 'just a shopping centre' but a place of heritage and culture.



*Night in the Ruins*

## 1. Introduction and methodology

*Reading Abbey Revealed* was conceived by Reading Museum (RM) and Reading Borough Council (RBC) in 2010. After two failed bids to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), *Reading Abbey Revealed* received Round 1 funding in 2014 before securing a £1.77m grant in December 2015. This was then match-funded by the Council with £1.37m.

The main aims of *Reading Abbey Revealed* were to conserve the remains of the nationally important Reading Abbey so that they, and the Abbey Gate, could be re-opened to the public, and to:

- improve the signage, interpretation and conservation of Reading Abbey Ruins, the Abbey Gate and the wider Abbey Quarter
- provide new life-long learning opportunities that will maximise the potential of the Ruins as an atmospheric outdoor learning space, and ensure the Gate and Ruins are evocative and enjoyable spaces within the heart of town
- revive Reading's Abbey Quarter, the historic heart of the town, giving people a powerful symbol of civic pride and identity
- reach wider audiences and involve local communities, ensuring that previously under-represented groups have the opportunity to be involved through a programme of new activities.

Reading Abbey Ruins are owned and managed by Reading Borough Council.

In parallel with this project the team have also received funding for other projects, such as over £500,000 from the Great Place Scheme for *Reading Place of Culture*, £237,500 funding from Arts Council England for *#DigiRDG: Town and Country*, over £800,000 from Historic England from the High Street Heritage Action Zone Fund, £80,000 from NLHF through the Cultural Recovery Fund and £15,000 from Arts Council England to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey - all of which illustrate how the success of *Reading Abbey Revealed* has led to further funding.

Reading Museum has also been part of a four year National Portfolio Organisation - Museums Partnership Reading (MPR) with the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) since April 2018, supported by Arts Council England (ACE).

As this project started up in 2016 the planned project outcomes align with the relevant NLHF strategic priorities at that time.

### Evaluation methodology

Alis Templeton and Alison Porter were appointed in May 2016 to evaluate *Reading Abbey Revealed*. This report is based on:

- extensive evaluation data and visitor feedback collected by the project team
- three project review meetings with staff members in 2018, 2019 and 2021
- meetings with individual staff
- volunteer surveys collected by the project team



- two group discussions with volunteers
- meetings with, and feedback from, community stakeholders.

### Impact of Covid-19

As with all heritage organisations, the impact of Covid-19 inevitably stopped many face to face activities, prevented public access and also meant that staff worked in various different ways. Volunteering opportunities in public facing roles were halted for extended periods of time.

As *Reading Abbey Revealed* was in full delivery at the time of lockdown, some approaches had to be modified, some postponed and timescales for delivery lengthened. The programme was extended with NLHF agreement, enabling some staff appointments to be extended in tandem. For example, the Abbey Learning Officer's contract was extended by six months.

New ways of working were developed within the team, such as more online visitor facing activity. This led to more engagement with some audiences (e.g. through the Youth Panel) and provided greater reach to other audiences (e.g. online sessions for schools). Staff also received additional training to support new online working.



*Bloom Britain award judges visiting the Abbey Quarter in 2019*



## 2. Outcomes for heritage

### 2.1 Heritage will be in better condition

#### *Conserving and re-opening the Abbey Ruins*

One of the most significant outcomes of *Reading Abbey Revealed* has been to successfully conserve the remains of the much-loved Abbey Ruins and to re-open them to the public. Closed since 2009 because of falling stones and safety concerns, the Abbey Ruins had been suffering from a destructive combination of 1980s hard capping repair work, invasive plants and water damage.

Following the closure in 2009, RBC continued to monitor the stone loss and surveyed the condition of the Ruins using specialist 3D scanning technology to inform a repair plan and schedule. Working with Historic England, they trialled different repair techniques including using sedum planting to cap the walls and hot-mixed lime mortar to re-point the stones and to restore fallen flint.



*Soft capping the Abbey Ruins*

The use of hot-mixed lime mortar was particularly innovative and a return to a technique from when the Abbey was first built 900 years ago. The project shared its learning from this through a series of workshops for conservation professionals.

Conservation of the Ruins started in February 2017 using these techniques and continued through to opening, with minor delays to the programme due to cold weather.

The newly stabilised Ruins were re-opened to the public in June 2018 to great excitement and acclaim and now play host to a wide range of activities and events for different audiences (see section 3.1).

The *Reading Abbey Revealed* project team and Reading Museum's long term supportive relationship with Historic England (HE) has contributed to the success of the conservation side of *Reading Abbey Revealed*. Historic England encouraged the trialling and use of different conservation and repair methods and they funded an additional £250,000 for unexpected conservation work on the Refectory wall.

HE has also offered a grant to St James Church to conserve parts of the Ruins not in RBC ownership.

### ***Conserving the Abbey Gateway***

Like the Abbey Ruins, the Grade I listed Abbey Gateway overlooking the Forbury Gardens had been impacted by water damage over the years. Caused by inaccessible faults in the original 1861 pipework and damage from invasive plants, *Reading Abbey Revealed* allowed the roof and pipework to be repaired and made accessible for maintenance. The stonework has also been restored and asbestos removed.

Following the conservation and repair work and some reconfiguration inside, the Gateway opened in September 2018 as a learning space for schools, including the popular Victorian Schoolroom sessions, and hosted family activities like a Santa's Grotto during the school holidays. The Abbey Gateway is also a feature on the Abbey Quarter tours and available for separate private tours. The Gateway has a personal connection for one volunteer:

*I went to the Abbey School - that gave me a clue that there was an Abbey in Reading, we also had the Gateway on our badge - but volunteering here has opened up so much more for me - and it is more interesting the longer I volunteer.*

Volunteer

As part of the Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021, a newly carved head of the last Abbot of Reading Abbey, Hugh Faringdon, was carved by Cliveden Conservation to replace one of the incomplete head-stops that decorate the outside of the Abbey Gateway. The figure of Hugh Faringdon was chosen through a public vote, beating five other short listed candidates.



*Hugh Faringdon new headstop carving on the Abbey Gateway*

## ***Sharing conservation learning - Hot-Mixed Lime Days***

Six Hot-Mixed Lime Days were held in 2017 and 2018 to share knowledge about using hot-mixed lime in historic conservation work and to showcase the conservation work at the Abbey Ruins and Abbey Gateway.

These days were highly successful with 131 people from differing backgrounds and professions attending. The list includes building surveyors, conservation architects, conservation officers, engineers (who deal with conservation and heritage works), and project managers.

Participant feedback demonstrates the impact of these specialist learning opportunities.

*Thank you so much for organising the course it was excellent I was really impressed with both the talk and the site. I learnt so much and will certainly be specifying hot lime mortars rather than NHL (natural hydraulic lime) as I did not realise the NHL performed more like a cement mortar nor that the hydraulic limes needed to be kept wet for so long.*

Project Engineer (Structures), Hampshire County Council

*Thank you again very much for setting up the hot lime mix training day at Reading Abbey. It was a huge eye opener, and great fun, too. My colleague Chris and I certainly felt we gained information not many people have at the moment, and felt witnessing developments at the forefront of conservation techniques - despite the fact the hot mixed lime tradition goes back thousands of years. We accordingly eulogized about the CPD yesterday with our colleagues in the office, and now they are interested in hot mixed lime.*

Senior Architect, Thomas Ford & Partners

Workshops inspired by heritage skills also formed part of the adult workshop programme (see section 3.1).

## **2.2 Heritage will be identified and better explained**

### ***Interpreting the Abbey Ruins and Abbey Quarter***

Another important outcome of *Reading Abbey Revealed* has been the creation and interpretation of the Abbey Quarter area. The Abbey Quarter includes Reading Museum and Town Hall, the Forbury Gardens, Abbey Gateway and Abbey Ruins, as well as the surrounding streets, and brings together the cultural heritage within the former grounds of Reading Abbey into a single unified site for the first time.

The Abbey Quarter is supported by a new suite of interpretation telling the history of the site, including 27 information boards in the Abbey Quarter, 24 directional signs around the town centre, a series of trails, a new exhibition in Reading Museum (The Story of Reading) and a dedicated website with a history of the Abbey, interactive map, visitor information and events listings<sup>1</sup>.

The new interpretation panels in the Abbey Quarter were designed by Equal Studio and include a model which shows what the Abbey looked like at its greatest extent.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.readingabbeyquarter.org.uk](http://www.readingabbeyquarter.org.uk)



This was informed by archaeological surveys taken in the lead up to the conservation work.

Staff and volunteers undertook extensive public consultation - testing interpretation panels, themes, imagery and text with 103 members of the public and school groups. Staff gathered feedback on panel size, text size, colours and contrast, the balance of text and images, and usability of the map and trail. Care was also taken to ensure that the interpretation of a Christian building was as accessible as possible to people of other faiths and none.



*New interpretation panels around the Abbey Quarter*

Consultation took place outside in the Abbey Quarter and in the temporary exhibition on Reading Abbey in the Museum, as well as outside Reading Minster church to get feedback on the newly installed prototype panel. Short tours of the exhibition by staff and volunteers were used to gather feedback, which then fed into the final interpretation. It was an ambitious programme that took time to organise, but was worth it in retrospect as visitor feedback has been so positive (see section 3.1 for more about this).

A challenge for the interpretation came towards the end of the first phase. Because the Ruins are a Scheduled Monument and any interpretation within the Ruins needed to be approved by Historic England, there were differences of opinion and compromises with some elements of the interpretation panel content aimed at children. However overall the content was approved and installed in time for the opening.

The extensive network of interpretation panels and their accompanying wayfinding system are very distinctive, usable and well-branded and have contributed to a growing sense of awareness and pride in the Abbey Quarter area and Reading's history (there is more about this in section 4.3). Although it took some time to get them signed off by the Transport and Highways division of RBC, the *Reading Abbey Revealed* team have received positive feedback from residents, businesses and colleagues within Reading Borough Council. Highways have since contracted Equal

Studios to continue the scheme around Reading Station so there is continuity with the Abbey Quarter.

*The wayfinding scheme has worked well and we've received a lot of good feedback. It was worth investing all that time, thought and consultation at the start on interpretation, wayfinding and branding. It took time but it was well worth it.*

Project and Performance Manager

Twenty four additional signs have been added at various other sites around Reading, including at Reading station, where links to the Abbey Quarter and other aspects of local heritage are highlighted.

*I was waiting for my daughter at the station the other day and was very surprised to see myself on a sign there, dressed as a monk....the story of the Abbey and links to the heritage of Reading start there.*

Volunteer

The Friends of Reading Museum initially took responsibility for caring for and cleaning the Abbey Quarter interpretation and orientation panels, and a new team of volunteers are continuing this role.

*The signs need to be looked after, we don't want them looking shabby how you see in some places.*

Volunteer

*We developed a new role of heritage custodian to take care and clean the signs. It needed to be worked out fully to get it right - thinking about how often to clean, the materials and where to store them etc.*

Volunteer Co-ordinator

The new *Story of Reading Gallery* opened at Reading Museum in February 2018 and includes the history of the Abbey, alongside new research and interpretation. It acts as a starting point and hub for people visiting the Abbey Quarter area.

There is also a new Abbey Quarter website with an interactive map which allows visitors to explore the history of the site for themselves<sup>2</sup>. Visitors can also visit the website, which is optimised for mobile use, through QR codes on the outside interpretation panels.

During lockdown periods, one volunteer also researched and wrote blogs to add to the website and contribute to the wider understanding of the history of Reading Abbey. This volunteer is now continuing with other time periods in Reading's history with a series on post-war Reading.

*[A volunteer] wrote an interesting blog about the archaeological evidence behind the Abbey and hidden waterways.*

Volunteer Co-ordinator

*I have a massive research resource....I like to be involved. The Abbey work has been an absolute joy and it links with my writing and other skills.*

Volunteer

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.readingabbeyquarter.org.uk/explore/explore-abbey>

### 2.3 Heritage will be better managed

Three new staff were appointed to support *Reading Abbey Revealed*:

- The Abbey Volunteer Co-ordinator (part time for 23 months) was appointed January 2017.
- The Abbey Community Engagement Officer (part time, then full time from August 2017 for 23 months) was appointed January 2017.
- Abbey Learning Officer (full time for 23 months) was appointed in January 2018.

The Abbey Community Engagement Officer left in July 2018 to pursue another post. In her feedback she was pleased by what she had been able to achieve, but was concerned that additional project management duties had cut into her time to deliver the Activity Plan. She also felt that her role should have been planned as a full time post from the outset.

*I began on a part time contract. Realistically this should have been planned as a full time post, regardless of the additional tasks that I picked up. This is the same for the other project roles (one of which was changed to be full time from the beginning).*

Abbey Community Engagement Officer

To respond to the workload and concerns of the Abbey Community Engagement Officer, the position was extended to full time from August 2017. The Abbey Learning Officer was also appointed as a full time post from the start of the contract. This has had an impact on the size and scale of what the project team has been able to successfully deliver. Additionally, the Abbey Learning Officer felt that her role could have started a little earlier to ensure that activities were developed and ready to run as soon as feasible.

Similarly, changes within the existing staff team, such as a new Learning Assistant, have also helped to ensure that the Reading Abbey programme is fully integrated with other museum programming and activities.

*Reading Abbey Revealed* also benefitted from RBC recruitment decisions. For example, when the Project Manager went on maternity leave, she was covered by an experienced contract manager, without whom the project would have struggled.

In addition to this, when the Abbey Volunteer Co-ordinator's role was completed, Reading Museum and the MERL combined resources to manage the volunteer teams and established Museums Partnership Reading (MPR). There is shared co-ordination, training and timetabling, and a volunteers' website.



### 3. Outcomes for people

#### 3.1 People will have had an enjoyable experience and learned about heritage

An exciting range of different activities aimed at engaging people with their heritage has been programmed over the five years of the project. These include talks and tours in the lead up to the re-opening, the re-opening celebration itself and an ongoing programme of schools workshops, outreach activities, tours, family activities and special events.

Although dampened by the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020, the Abbey Ruins remained open as an outdoor space for people to enjoy during the lockdowns.

Highlights from the public activity programme and visitor response to them are included in this chapter.

##### *Pre-opening - tours and talks*

During the first phase of the project, from April to September 2017, the Abbey Community Engagement Officer ran conservation / hard hat tours to introduce visitors to the site and the conservation project. Visitors learned about the history of Reading Abbey and the conservation works being undertaken to preserve it. There were also two corporate tours for local Reading companies Boyes Turner and Barton Willmore.

The nine tours were attended by 141 people, with 110 people completing short evaluation forms. Of these,

- 100% of visitors rated the event overall as good or excellent, with 85% rating it as excellent.
- 100% rated their enjoyment as good or excellent, with 85.5% rating it as excellent.
- 96% (106 people) agreed that they would recommend a conservation tour to someone else.
- 97% (107 people) said that they learnt something new about conservation.
- 88% (97 people) said that they learnt something new about Reading Abbey.
- 79% (87 people) said that they learnt something new about the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project.

The Community Engagement Officer responded to some of the issues that came up in visitor evaluation. For example, in some of the early tours visitors requested online booking so booking through Eventbrite was introduced in later events.

The positive visitor ratings are reflected in the comments received from visitors. People particularly enjoyed the hot-lime mortar demonstrations and learning about the history and conservation of Reading Abbey.

*Very interesting visit - great to see the Abbey receiving the care and attention it deserves. Looking forward to seeing it opened again.*

*I absolutely loved the visit and the enthusiasm of the Project Officer was just great too. Fascinating to understand the evolution of the conservation techniques being used and that part of the Abbey will continue as an ongoing 'live' experiment in conservation techniques. As someone who lived in Reading for 40 years, I've always loved the Abbey Ruins and am SO PLEASED to see it now being promoted as part of the wider 'Abbey Quarter' project.*

*The lime mortar demonstration was really cool. Also seeing people working on it.*

Visitor comments, conservation tours



*Reading Abbey Quarter tour*

In the lead up to the re-opening, the project programmed another eight accessible talks focusing exclusively on the history of Reading Abbey. A total of 371 people attended the talks, with most selling out. Subjects covered by the talks included Reading Abbey Gatehouse in Context, Introducing Jane Austen, Matilda the Empress, Blood and Bones: The Veneration of Relics at Reading Abbey and Science and Magic in the Monastery. Guest blogs were also written to allow a wider audience to learn more on these topics from experts<sup>3</sup>. There are still ad hoc talks about the Abbey complementing the wider Museum programming e.g. there is a talk about Jane Austen on Jane Austen Day.

In her written feedback, the Community Engagement Officer noted that the accessible approach worked - speakers used non-academic language and where possible used slides and images.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/reading-abbey](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/reading-abbey)

Overall visitors enjoyed the talks programme. Out of a total of 119 evaluation forms completed:

- 92.4% rated the event overall as good or excellent, with 60.5% rating it as excellent.
- 90.7% rated their enjoyment as good or excellent, with 58.8% rating it as excellent.
- 80.7% of visitors (or 96 people) would recommend the talks to someone else.
- 73.9% of visitors (or 88 people) said that they learned something new about Reading Abbey.
- 40.8% (or 40 visitors) said that they learned about *Reading Abbey Revealed*.

*Joy's talk was informative, detailed and highly enjoyable - thank you, Joy. A short introduction about the Reading Abbey Quarter project was interesting too: as a local resident (of 30 years). I applaud all efforts made to put Reading on the historical and cultural map. Thank you!*

Visitor comment, Introducing Jane Austen talk

*Very interesting talk and illustrations and slides too. Explained quite a few terms that I have come across but never really understood before. I learned a lot now about how really clever the monks were besides praying and copying and illustrating texts.*

Visitor comment, Science and Magic in the Monastery talk

The *Reading Abbey Revealed* team also offered 14 free tours of the Abbey Ruins on Heritage Open Day and Water Fest in 2017 to around 135 people. These were a particularly successful way of engaging local people in the project.

On Heritage Open Day 56 people completed evaluation forms for their tours, showing that:

- 98% of visitors rated the event overall as good or excellent, with 71% rating it as excellent.
- 95% rated their enjoyment as good or excellent, with 76% rating it as excellent.
- 100% (56 people) agreed that they would recommend the tour to someone else.
- 80.3% (45 people) said that they learnt something new about conservation.
- 98.2% (55 people) said that they learnt something new about Reading Abbey.
- 100% (56 people) said that they learnt something new about the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project.

Visitor feedback focused on the knowledge and enthusiasm of the guides and how much visitors learned about the history of Reading.



*The tour leader was really enthusiastic about the project and knowledgeable about the buildings. It was really good to understand what conservation work is taking place.*

*Michael's delivery was enthusiastic and amusing with little snippets and stories that brought the tour to life. We have lived in Reading for over 40 years but found out a whole load more about more about the Abbey Quarter than we expected to. We found the tour fascinating.*

*It was great to go on a free tour to find more out about the Abbey. I've lived in Reading for 10 years and didn't know a lot about what was told. I didn't realise how big or important the Abbey was or how important Reading was at the time.*

Heritage Open Day visitor comments



*Down at the Abbey music concert*

## ***Re-opening in 2018 - festivals and performances***

The Abbey Ruins opened with a huge celebration in July 2018 with an estimated 18,000 attending a re-launch festival across the Abbey Quarter.

The festival included Civil War re-enactments in the Forbury Gardens, an archery activity, music performances, costumed interpretation, demonstrations and tours. It was combined with the annual Water Fest which meant that the project team enjoyed support from the RBC events team, as well as increased profile from the wider festival.

Feedback on the re-opening was overwhelmingly positive:

*On behalf of the Friends of Reading Abbey, may I congratulate you and your colleagues on a hugely successful day, the culmination of an immense amount of work. There was a really good atmosphere, and such a lot of positive interest and enthusiasm. We are really delighted at what has been achieved.*

Chairman, Friends of Reading Abbey

*Atmosphere was brilliant - real sense of excitement and pride in the site. I was born in Reading and grew up knowing the history of the Abbey but realise how few people were as lucky as me! It was great to see young people discovering the Abbey's history for the first time.*

Reading resident

*At the end of the day I got chatting with a mum and her 13 year old son, while we were looking at one the panels in the ruins. And the boy said "if I could time travel I'd go back in time and visit the Abbey!" I asked him which year he would go back to and he said the day the Abbey opened in 1164! You could see the event had really captured his imagination.*

Volunteer feedback

*@rdgabbey fond memories of playing here as a small child and strolling through the gardens after school as a teenager. Nearly 60 years on, its great to be able to enjoy the #abbeyruins again. Congratulations to the restoration team.*

*I thought this was such a wonderful day and brought so much life back to a wonderful and historic part of Reading more of this please!*

Visitor feedback from social media

The re-opening also featured *In Ruins*, an immersive promenade theatre performance through the Abbey Quarter celebrating the re-opening of the Abbey Ruins. Ten audience members at a time walked through the Abbey Quarter experiencing scenes from the Abbey's history. It was produced by Sitelines and South Street Arts in partnership with a number of different local arts organisations and groups. There were 400 paid tickets sold, with another estimated 400 unpaid attendances (onlookers enjoying the Abbey Quarter).

Both audience and participants responded very positively to the production, saying that it was an exciting and immersive way of learning about the history of the Abbey Quarter.

*Such a wonderful way to learn about Reading's history and the Abbey. Marvellous performances. Loved it! Moving choral accompaniment.*

*Reading in the Civil War. This part of Reading's history was completely new to me, very interesting and VERY well presented in the Site Lines production.*

Audience comments

Seventeen community participants in the performance completed evaluation forms. All 17 said that they had learnt something new from their involvement:

*More feeling of what a monk's life must have been like.*

*We researched the daily practices of the Benedictine monks to incorporate into the performance. We explored various events that would have taken place and decided upon the celebrations and rituals surrounding the Nativity of St. John the Baptist.*

*I learnt what a typical day as a school girl then was like.*

Community participant feedback

Participants also described how enjoyable and rewarding it was to be involved:

*Really excellent to be in the Abbey Ruins and to learn to sing plainchant. It was exciting and fun to perform in. I enjoyed learning about the Abbey and working with professional actors.*

*The faces of the audience as the battle came towards them were unforgettable.*

*It was so fun to be able to perform to the public so close up. It was a really amazing experience and I enjoyed it very much.*

Community participant feedback

Asked if there was anything they would have improved, the participants mentioned more rehearsal time, improved security (they had nowhere secure to leave their belongings) and better organisation (there was a double booking for one performance at the Chapter House).

On Saturday 8 September 2018, the Abbey Ruins hosted *Night in the Ruins*, an evening of live music and illuminations to celebrate the end of the summer season of reopening events. Organised by Reading Council in partnership with the Are You Listening? Festival and Reading Fringe Festival, *Night in the Ruins'* designer Stuart Melrose took inspiration from the Abbey Ruins to create a light installation. The event sold out in three weeks and was attended by 400 people. Again, feedback was very positive:

*It was an amazing event in itself - excellent use of the ruins to project images etc. I was very pleased to be able to attend as I missed out on buying a ticket... Everyone was hugely positive about it in general and I received praise on how helpful I and other volunteers had been.*

Steward, Night in the Ruins



*Awesome evening of music and light show at Abbey Ruins. A little rain couldn't dampen the spirits #NightInTheRuins #rdguk*

*Last night the @RdgAbbey was brought alive again with music, light and celebration. Really proud to be there! #NightInTheRuins #rdguk*

Twitter comments

### ***The Ruins re-opened - casual visits, tours and costumed interpretation***

The Abbey Ruins are free to visit and open daily from dawn to dusk. Although the new interpretation panels, website, family trails and Story of Reading exhibition at the Museum share the history of the site with self-guided visitors, the Museum also offers Reading Abbey Quarter tours for adults and families, alongside private group tours. Led by volunteer guides, the popular 90 minute tours started off twice a month in 2019 and have been running every Saturday during summer 2021.



*Guided tours of Reading Abbey*

Feedback collected from evaluation postcards completed by 120 Abbey Quarter visitors shows that:

- 96.6% of visitors rated their experience as good or excellent, with 68% saying that it was excellent.
- 75.6% of visitors agreed that they had learnt something new on their visit.

When asked what they had learnt, 89 people gave more detailed responses. Almost all of these related to learning new historical facts about Reading and Reading Abbey.

*The size of the Abbey before it was destroyed.*

*I didn't realise the Abbey Gateway was used as part of a school that Jane Austen attended.*

*The word fart was first written down at the Abbey.*

*Lots of aspects of the Abbey life from the information boards. Nice to be able to visualise how the Abbey would have looked, sounded and even smelled nearly 900 years ago.*

Visitor comments

The postcards also asked what people liked about their visit. Many people visiting the Abbey Quarter mentioned the new interpretation panels. There was also a sense of pride amongst many visitors.

*The interpretation/information boards in the Abbey ruins give a good mixture of history/information/context.*

*I liked the way in which the ruins have been restored and made visitor friendly.*

*It made me feel very proud to see the Abbey open, full of people enjoying their heritage and all the events. Putting the information in Broad Street and around Reading is an excellent idea to help us escape the idea that Reading is only here for shopping or its station.*

*Wonderful to see the ruins open to the public again and pride being taken about Reading's history. The Abbey Quarter area is now a proper focal point for the town centre.*

Visitor comments

A number of visitors suggested improvements such as re-orienting some of the interpretation panels and creating an Abbey Quarter app (although the panels do have QR codes linking to a map on the website which is designed and optimised for mobile use).

*I found some of the new signage boards in the Abbey Ruins confusing as they were always aligned north/south which wasn't necessarily the direction where the board was sited so it wasn't always easy to determine exactly where I was on the map.*

*Perhaps have a downloadable abbey app that acts as a tour guide (pod cast). What would be amazing would be images of the Abbey while it was standing placed into the modern surroundings to give a sense of scale. Perhaps this could be done from various points using a QR code? Don't know how feasible this is.*

*How possible would it be to acquire funding to make a Reading Abbey download app for smart phones? For most visually impaired people wanting to go alone it's currently inaccessible.*

Visitor comments

Following feedback from visitors, the general Reading Abbey Quarter Tours now include a visit to the Abbey Gateway as standard. A new additional premium tour focuses on the Gateway itself and takes people to the rooftop where they can see the Forbury Gardens and Abbey Ruins.

Tours have also been popular with local companies such as Network Rail, as well as organisations like U3A. Staff and volunteers have noticed an increased pride in the

local area from local businesses in particular, and an increased interest in walking tours linked to wellbeing activities.

*People, like local office workers, now visualise a bigger space for the Abbey.*

*I think that visitors are genuinely surprised - they thought Reading was one of those places you go through to get somewhere else.*

Volunteer comments

The team were originally offering costumed tours for families, but these didn't book as well as hoped and volunteers were demoralised by low turnouts. A decision was made to focus on using costumed interpretation of characters like King Henry I, Jane Austen, an Abbey Garden Monk and medieval laundress at the bigger events like Water Fest, Jane Austen Day and Forbury Fiesta, and as part of schools programming such as Take Over Day.



*Family learning at the Abbey Ruins*

### ***Summer events, family activities and Abbey 900***

Large-scale events, like Water Fest, have long taken pride of place in the Reading cultural calendar, but are now augmented by activities celebrating the entire Abbey Quarter.

*That worked well - the combined event with the Water Fest - that drew a lot of people's attention to the Abbey. People were wanting to walk along canal side and wander further afield - so this helped people see the wider spaces around the Abbey.*

Volunteer



Summer events over the years of *Reading Abbey Revealed* have included Saturday craft/making workshops like stone carving, basket weaving, medieval tile making, and leather embroidery in the Ruins as well as larger events such as a Photography Day and Teddy Bears Picnic in the Forbury Gardens and Abbey Ruins. Some participant comments from a stone carving workshop include:

*Professional, efficient, friendly tutor and staff. Good balance of tuition, demonstration and own work.*

*Well organised, fun event, where you get to try something different.*

Feedback from workshop participants

To celebrate the 900th anniversary of the foundation of Reading Abbey in 2021, Reading Borough Council programmed a season of activity, culminating at a celebration event at Water Fest on Saturday 19th June.

As with all events during the Covid-19 pandemic, Water Fest was delivered in a stringently Covid compliant way. Workshop and interactive activities were booked in advance and numbers were limited. Safety measures necessitated a ticketed system of 4,000 people capacity and staggered arrival times. A range of online activities also complemented the live event. This event leveraged an additional £15,000 grant from Arts Council England.

Events included 'Brothers', South Street Arts' new piece of site-specific theatre from their award winning SITELINES programme which took inspiration from the Abbey's rich history, previews of Rabble Theatre's play 'The Last Abbot' about Hugh Faringdon, storytelling, children's activities, living history and historical re-enactments, talks and tours about the history of the Abbey, music and dance performances, medieval blacksmith demonstrations (which were also filmed and shared online) and a mindfulness trail around the Abbey Ruins.



*Performance of Rabble Theatre's play 'The Last Abbot' about Hugh Faringdon*

The newly carved head of the last Abbot of Reading Abbey, Hugh Faringdon, designed to replace one of the incomplete head-stops that decorate the outside of the Abbey Gateway was also unveiled.

The day was supported by 47 volunteers recruited through Reading Voluntary Action, as well as the existing volunteer team. One volunteer commented:

*From my own childhood the Abbey has had a sort of spiritual significance... there is something about it and its history... I was really sad when it was closed off to the public. Recently there was a light show there and me and my old schoolfriend went... it was a very magical thing - I hope there will be more [events]*

Volunteer



*Abbey volunteers for Abbey 900 / Water Fest 2021*

Evaluation feedback was collected from 68 visitors and 33 volunteers on the day, but because of a technical error only 78 people were able to complete the ratings questions. However, from this it is clear that both visitors and volunteers enjoyed themselves, learnt something new about their heritage, felt pride in Reading and felt an increased sense of wellbeing:

- 88.5% of people agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good time, with 62.8% strongly agreeing.
- 71.8% agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned something new about the heritage and history of Reading Abbey, with 21.8% strongly agreeing.
- 76.9% agreed or strongly agreed that the activity they attended had a positive effect on their wellbeing, with 29.5% strongly agreeing.



As can be seen in table 1, a total of 328,420 people attended Abbey 900 in 2021.

**Table 1: Participants and audience numbers for Abbey 900**

Participant and audience type	Numbers
Artists and creatives, or specialists	161
Participants	218
Audience (live)	4,000
Audience (broadcast, online, in writing)	324,041
<b>Total</b>	<b>328,420</b>

As part of the Abbey 900 celebrations, Reading Museum worked with local organisation, No. 5 Young People who support young people with their mental health. Inspired by both the history of the Abbey and the need to create a greater awareness of mental health, No.5's seven Young Ambassadors devised and led two activities for local people to take part in on the day - a drawing activity where people were asked to be still, to notice and draw the history that was around them and a mindfulness exercise where small groups of five people enjoyed a five minute session where they were asked to 'step back in time 900 years ago' and to 'relax in the past'. Both activities aimed to make both the heritage of the site and mindfulness fun and accessible to children, young people and adults.



*The Young Ambassador's drawing activity at Abbey 900*

Although no formal feedback was collected specifically from the Young Ambassadors' sessions they observed that people who participated enjoyed being given time to sit, feel calm and to notice the history around them. This was particularly welcome as many felt anxious as they emerged from a long Covid-19 enforced lockdown.

As well as learning about the history of Reading Abbey, the Young Ambassadors themselves learned new skills through their involvement in Abbey 900, including team work, engaging with the public and being confident enough to try new things out.

For some of the younger Young Ambassadors working with the Museum gave them their first experience of being in a professional environment and learning skills such as time keeping, listening and being responsible and respectful. This learning has been facilitated by staff at Reading Museum who remained open, flexible and encouraging throughout the project.

*The Young Ambassadors are proud of what they've achieved. They've learned about Reading's history, but they also feel more ownership of the museum. Reading Museum has trusted them and given them confidence in their decisions, skills and abilities. It's given them a sense of pride that they can deliver a successful project.*

Operations and Relationships Manager, No 5 Young People



Music in Ruins, summer 2021



## Schools programme

A wide range of programming and resources for schools and teachers has been developed as part of the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project. These have included a number of 'one-off' activities to celebrate various stages in the restoration project, but others have been developed to embed in the on-going resources and programming for schools. These are outlined below.

### *New schools' programme*

After the opening of the Abbey Gateway in July 2018, the learning team launched the new schools' programme in September to largely positive response. This comprised a new workshop 'Royals in Reading' specifically about the Reading Abbey story, and the Victorian Schoolroom sessions were relocated to the Abbey Gateway.

In 2018 the pilot 'Royals in Reading' schools workshops attracted 172 pupils (6 groups) from year 3 to year 7. In the feedback, teachers all commented that visiting the Abbey had enhanced the visit '*Definitely! 'Wow' they said as they entered.*' The workshops were slightly revised following teachers' suggestions such as including more background vocabulary, artefacts, images and information (for younger pupils). Four teachers really enjoyed the session and would recommend it. Pre-visit information was also sent out and one teacher commented '*Rhea was great. The info sent through prior to the visit was excellent.*' This has now become a feature of the schools' programme and an online virtual version is also available.

The decision to relocate the Victorian Schoolroom to the Abbey Gateway also had implications for the project team. As the move wasn't in the original plans, the staff had to adjust quickly to a change of location and, initially, some unexpected logistical issues.

*There have been a series of small logistical challenges, like getting the children from the museum to the Gateway....session leaders are getting used to it.*

Learning Officer

The Learning team planned the operations for the new Victorian School room, and it has quickly become a clear asset for the schools' offer. In the first school term alone they hosted 44 sessions there with 1,229 children (both key stage 1 and 2) and 192 adults. Despite the closure of the Schoolroom between March 2020 and September 2021 due to Covid restrictions, between Sept 2018 - October 2021 there were approx. 219 Victorian School room sessions for 6137 children and 803 adults.<sup>4</sup>

The space seems to add to the drama of activities. One volunteer noticed:

*I've seen children leaving the Victorian school in the Abbey Gateway - they are buzzing about their experience and that is a big positive. Maybe we could get a kid's tour of the Abbey going too?*

Volunteer

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally 15 family sessions for 264 children and 80 adults have been held in the School room, which is also used for other activities such as tours, meetings and family events.

The new space and programme has been received very positively by teachers who had visited before and could compare the two locations.

*It was a lovely location with plenty of space.*

*More space enabled us to deal with nervous children or children with extra needs better.* The Disraeli School

*More space to accommodate induction and classroom experience.*

*Very effective space: windows, high ceiling room added to the experience.*

*It made it more special going to a different location.*

Comments from teachers

The Learning team have effectively addressed the initial logistical issues highlighted during the piloting stage by preparing risk assessments, offering pre-visits for teachers, producing a visual map and photographs of the Abbey Gateway that teachers can see in advance and running activities which engage pupils while they are waiting for the toilets.

*[There were] no problems. Staff were always at hand to walk us between buildings. Road crossing handled well.*

*Very Good. Escorted both times and very helpful [staff].*

Comments from teachers

Making explicit links to local history has been important for teachers. The Learning team have been surprised that the outdoor session was booking so well in the autumn months (prior to lockdown). Most interest has been generated by teachers of key stage 2 and year 7.

In response to lockdown and the inevitable restrictions to onsite visits, the team have been required to adapt and make changes to their programmes to continue to engage schools.

*There's been a massive amount of new learning that's happened in the last year - for ourselves as well as young people. We've started to offer online workshops for children and we've learned a lot about the process and how to do it, as well as how best to communicate with teachers.*

Learning Officer

They have developed the programme and added virtual online sessions<sup>5</sup>, including the Royals in Reading session<sup>6</sup>. 58 of these virtual workshops have been offered during the 2020-21 academic year, with 1,766 pupils participating.

Additionally, the 43 virtual Victorian Schoolroom sessions started in 2020 reached 1165 children and 59 adults. Teachers gave feedback about these Victorian Childhood virtual sessions:

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools/virtual-sessions>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/explore/schools/local-history-royals-reading-abbey-virtual-session>

*A very informative session, delivered well and very willing to stop and answer the children's questions. The mini-films were great.*

*The boys loved the videos and have been full of all the facts they have learnt. It was great having a written activity as well.*

Comments from teachers



*Victorian school session in the Abbey Gateway*

### ***Take Over Days***

Schools' activities such as the conservation workshops culminating in the Take Over Day with St John's School in 2017 were also successful pilots for getting schools involved in conservation on the site from an early stage in the project.

*We had a workshop with the Master Mason at the Ruins, showing the children what we were doing and it was a beautiful experience for the children. It was the first encounter between a school and the conservation project, and very important and positive for us.*

Learning Officer

This first Take Over Day involved 60 Year 6 children, who had been following the conservation project for six months, then reporting their findings in the form of a 'virtual tour' to a VIP group, including the Mayor of Reading, at a special event at the Museum<sup>7</sup>.

*The children were able to develop their higher-level research skills - gathering information from a range of sources.*

Comment from teachers

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/virtual-tour-takeover-day-2018>

Following the success of the previous Take Over Day, the learning team followed the same model and worked with two different schools over a number of weeks to develop and test downloadable music resources which had been produced with a music education specialist. Costumed interpreters worked with the children on site visits to inspire and inform them. An INSET day with teachers also fed into this, and the new resources were available for the Take Over Day in November 2019. Both schools delivered a performance attended by an audience of 50 parents and museum guests. A blog of the event and social media posts were made to share the activity<sup>8</sup>. The pupils were awarded Discover Arts Awards as part of this project.



*Dancers at Diwali in the Ruins*

In 2020 Reading Museum worked closely with the MERL and three schools to organise schools' workshops to prepare pupils for a collaborative Diwali and Odissi Dance performance, which was planned to take place using the Abbey Ruins as the location for Take Over Day.

Each school was taught a different scene to tell the story of Diwali. This performance was re-located due to Covid-19 restrictions, nevertheless, the individual dance performances took place, were filmed and available online as part of the Reading Love Culture 2020. A separate performance by Kala the Arts in the Dormitory of the Abbey was also filmed. As in previous projects, the workshops were also supported by an INSET session to inform and prepare teachers.

*Thank you for the lovely workshops [led by Kala the Arts] in September. The girls really loved learning this style of dance as we don't do much of it on the curriculum...it was also lovely to see the performance from Geoffrey Field, my class were very complimentary.*

Comment from teachers

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/sounds-reading-abbey-takeover-day-2019>



The Project Manager noted that *'this collaboration has been incredibly successful, showing the dedication of all involved to create a legacy of community and cultural collaboration'*.

## **INSET**

Teacher INSETs have been offered throughout the duration of the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project, focussing on different topics as new materials or workshops became available, as well as other aspects of provision for schools. 204 people have attended thirteen INSET sessions and 17 teacher visits for 23 people during the project. INSET sessions also double up as an opportunity to consult teachers about their views on the proposed programmes and resources and are used to inform the heritage team.

For example, in 2018 three INSET sessions were held. The first focussed on the history of the Abbey Quarter and provided an opportunity to consult teachers about the kinds of resources and sessions that would support them in teaching the curriculum. This introductory INSET attracted fifteen teachers and three teachers who gave feedback described it as 'good' in regards to the content of the session.

Teachers made several suggestions on the topics of resources and sessions that could be developed to support *Reading Abbey Revealed* such as music through the ages e.g. medieval and modern including different instruments and composers, and also wide aspects of geography i.e. human, physical and economic. The 'Royals in Reading' school session INSET in May 2018 attracted four teachers, all of whom found the session overall, the content and the activities 'good' or 'excellent'.

Other INSET sessions in 2019 have included 'Music Inspired by Reading Abbey' and a literacy/creative writing INSET day attended by fifteen teachers. The teachers who attended also agreed to test out and feedback on new resources produced. One teacher offered their specialist help with music:

*To look at the musical representation of your monk's rap as music notation; and rhythm patterns are needed to be taught properly and in the correct time - as the new music curriculum expectations are that the children do understand note values and time signatures especially in KS2. If you would like any help with this I am more than happy to look at it with you.*

Teachers also really valued the practical nature of the activities.

In 2020 a Diwali and Odissi Dance INSET session for fifteen teachers was held jointly with Kala the Arts and MERL. Downloadable Diwali resources were made available, drawing on the Museum's collections. Participants' comments included:

*The session was a good pace and enabled us to try the dance moves with instructions. Having access to the supporting resources will be really useful and allow me to take the ideas back into the classroom.*

*Thanks for a really fun and practical session. Learning about the Tabla tradition was fascinating. I found the dances difficult to keep up with, so hopefully the recording will break some of the movements down for the children. Resources look great, I am looking forward to using them to help me plan for next term.*

*I found it enjoyable. It was really nice to learn from such knowledgeable people and I loved that it was interactive.*

*Really lovely to see a cross cultural celebration using the resources from the museums.*

Comments from teachers

In 2021 an INSET session shared the 900th anniversary developments, online resources and the 'Royals in Reading' virtual sessions with teachers.

### ***Other work with schools***

A number of other initiatives during the project have provided opportunities to forge links with new audiences.

### ***Science and history detectives and ArtLab***

Prior to the Covid-19 restrictions, outreach into schools worked well, with 13 volunteer university students going into 10 schools to run 'Detective Box' workshops about the Abbey. The ArtLab project, run in collaboration with students from the University of Reading, also involved a training session for students to prepare them for their roles. The local connection and museum involvement was important:

*Sited at the museum and the local area it enabled us to think about how others (session leader, teachers, peers) present activities and articulate ideas. It was particularly enjoyable to go into the working depths of the museum to the box room and handle the objects, thinking about their living context, and politics of conservation methods.*

ArtLab student volunteer, University of Reading

This experience also raised the possibility for the Museum staff of having 'more conversation with students about their experience and ideas about sensory experiences, when teaching and learning with objects and collections', to enable students to deepen their understanding.

Linked to this, boxes with resources including manuscripts, paints, minerals, architecture and building materials have been developed, including a mini-brick version of the Abbey.

### ***Arts Awards***

Six looked after children achieved Arts Awards in 2018. The sessions involved workshops based around the Abbey Ruins and working with digital technology to create animations and 3D maps. The RBC group organiser was initially apprehensive about the appropriateness of the session:

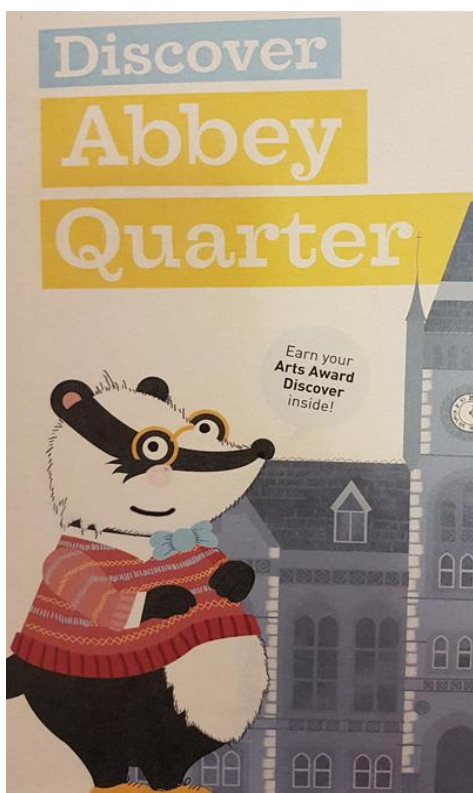
*The project exceeded my expectations, I was apprehensive about the project being a bit too educational and feeling like they were on a school trip however this was not the case. The children had fun which was the main outcome and the learning became a by-product.*

RBC group organiser

The group organiser also commented that the attitude of the staff helped to make the day and make the young people feel welcome.

This led to further involvement with other looked after children and a project to co-produce a book and achieve a Discover Arts Award (see section 4.1).

The Museum, Abbey Ruins and Abbey Quarter are part of the Arts Awards scheme and children can work towards an Arts Award using three Discover trails. For example, other Arts Awards work has taken place with local Year 6 pupils as part of transition activities as they move from primary to secondary schools.



*Arts Award Discover trail for the Abbey Quarter*

During the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project a total of 260 young people have been involved in Arts Awards.

### **Resources**

A comprehensive range of four additional downloadable resources has been produced and is available on the Reading Museums website<sup>9</sup>, including Creative Writing, Dance and Music resources. A wide range of pre- and post-visit resources have also been produced to support onsite and online versions of the 'Royals in Reading' workshop, ensuring the session is integrated into the curriculum.

### **Marketing**

The learning team have access to the 'dotmailer' system and there is a dedicated teachers' mailing sign up list on the website.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools/information-for-teachers/teacher-resources](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools/information-for-teachers/teacher-resources)

### ***Other initiatives***

Phoenix College and RISC also worked together over four sessions to build a medieval herb garden outside the Abbey Gateway. The garden was used to trial an informal learning session with the Young Archaeologists Club (YAC), working closely with the University of Reading.

Here the group leader felt that children were able to see the ruins and ‘*create a perfect picture of how the Abbey could have been*’. They also ‘*especially liked the hands on activity, creating the toothpaste from herbs*’.

Other subsequent activity with YAC has included ink making and manuscripts and stained glass window painting.

### **3.2 People will have developed skills**

#### ***Staff training and learning***

During the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project staff have been trained as required to fulfil aspects of the activities, including the Abbey Learning Officer who was trained to deliver and assess Arts Awards.

The Digi-Reading programme trained the museum team on how to use social media and how to promote the project through blogs and Facebook Live. Staff, volunteers and guest lecturers have contributed a range of popular blog posts.

Staff learnt new skills as part of the Covid-19 shift to more online delivery of the learning and events programme. The learning team were trained to use filming and recording equipment, editing techniques and editing software. This will enable them to update and refresh online resources on an on-going basis.

*The positive impact of Covid is that the learning team have embraced blended learning*

Learning Officer

*Reading Abbey Revealed* has also facilitated new partnerships and networks which Museum staff have learned from.

*I think the project has provided a lot of people in the core team with opportunities to network. And as we all know, it's the networks that actually gradually provide the opportunities. Networking is a really important learning activity, as well as a way of developing support.*

Marketing and Learning Officer

The core Museum staff have also benefited simply through having new people join their team.

*I think it's great that whenever you have new people coming in, even on these relatively temporary roles like the interns, they bring new skills and experience with them. And we've had some great staff and interns. I've personally learned a lot from working with colleagues.*

Museum Manager



## ***Interns***

Internships (or paid placements) have been a particularly successful part of the project. The six paid interns recruited as part of the Activity Plan have provided invaluable support - the archaeology intern, for example, undertook research and cataloguing which fed into the interpretation, and was nominated for a Robert Hogan Award, and the community engagement intern supported the initial Abbey on Wheels project.

The programme has also led interns into employment. The social media intern was later appointed as the Community Engagement Officer and the archaeology intern took a post at the Foreign Office. Staff members put this success down to careful recruitment and support of interns. The HR department, however, has had some difficulties understanding the role of paid placements and that the project was looking to recruit someone who could benefit from and grow in the role and who might be new to working in museums and heritage, rather someone with exactly matching experience and skills.

*Everyone who has done an internship has gone on to employment. While they've been here, they've been doing real work so they can build their CV... The recruitment process was important too. We weren't looking for another member of staff; we were looking for someone who had the abilities but needed that step up and that support.*

Museum Manager

The experience of using different recruitment criteria for the paid placements has led to a wider consideration of recruitment policies. As part of their new Access Policy and Plan, the example, the Museum is actively looking at how to widen access to all of their roles.

*We've started to look at some new ways of working in terms of our recruitment process, not just internship type roles, but for our main roles. We are aware that there are quite often cases where someone may come from a diverse background or have a disability, and is excluded from the shortlisting because they haven't quite made it in terms of their skills and experience, but they may still be a very good candidate.*

Marketing and Learning Officer

The *Reading Abbey Revealed* interns were very positive about their roles, their exposure to Reading's heritage and the skills they developed in a relatively short space of time:

*This internship has given me invaluable experience working in a museum/heritage environment. My job role allowed me to develop existing skills in digital engagement where I felt I was a valued member of the team.*

*I got to do things that I hadn't done before such as helping with the recruitment of volunteers. I enjoyed time in the galleries and have learnt a lot about the history of my hometown and feel a renewed sense of interest and pride in it.*

*It developed my leadership skills and made me a better communicator. On*

*two separate occasions, I supervised volunteers as they located, measured and photographed objects to assist with the project. My approach to this was much more communicative, organised and productive on the second occasion; the results were correspondingly better (the volunteers were more focused in their tasks, and we achieved everything I wanted to).*

*I developed my knowledge of archaeology. Now I know what 'beakhead voussoirs' and tegulae are! More practically, I have some understanding of excavation, reporting and deposition processes; of context numbers, special finds numbers and stratigraphy.*

Feedback from *Reading Abbey Revealed* interns

The interns found the staff team very supportive and were also appreciative of being part of the wider project team:

*My bosses were excellent. Angela and Stuart struck the perfect balance of allowing me to manage my time independently and being there to answer my questions when necessary. They focused on my personal and professional development, allocating me a wide range of tasks which would equip me with skills for my future career, and regularly giving me feedback on my work.*

*This has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience with wonderful supportive colleagues and the work had been rewarding and pushed me just enough out of my comfort zone to be challenging and stimulating. It was an amazing privilege to be a part of the Abbey re-opening and I will remember the buzz and excitement of the opening event for many years to come!*

Feedback from *Reading Abbey Revealed* interns

The internship model was successful and two further interns were planned - one to work with the collections team and the other to support marketing for the Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021. However, Covid-19 prevented this from happening and the budget was redirected to extending the Learning Officer post instead.

### **3.3 People will have volunteered time**

By the end of 2019 the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project had well exceeded its volunteer target, attracting more than double the projected number of volunteers. At the current time more than 175 volunteers are listed as active in the Museums Partnership Reading (between Reading Museum and the MERL).

In addition to supporting the programme through a wide range of roles - from tour guiding, research, costumed interpretation, working with schools to gardening, stewarding and sewing costumes - volunteers have provided fresh blood and new ideas.

The Volunteers' Co-ordinator reports there has been a small increase in the diversity of volunteers, particularly in terms of attracting men (particularly to tour guiding), but more could still be done in this area. The Co-ordinator also works with the MERL and is looking to create new roles which appeal to a wider range of volunteers<sup>10</sup>. A volunteer recruitment and platform has been introduced. Since the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://app.betterimpact.com/PublicOrganization/4e1ce1b0-421b-491d-b698-5414273ac4ef/1>

project started a number of new roles has been introduced - such as a heritage custodian - and other volunteers have been conducting research and writing posts for online platforms and exhibitions.

131 separate individuals have volunteered at least once with Abbey-related activities since the RAR project began. Since the pandemic lockdowns and restrictions began in March 2020, 56 people volunteered for nine Abbey-related activities on 118 occasions, donating 549 hours. Additionally volunteers have continued to develop their knowledge and skills during lockdowns, for example, in January and June 2021, 47 volunteers joined two volunteer-led Zoom talks about the Abbey; an additional engagement of 74 hours.

The current number of active volunteers remains at 40, and they will continue to sustain the following Abbey-related activities:

- Abbey Quarter tour guide and sweeper
- Museum on Wheels stall at community events
- Heritage Custodian
- Costumed Interpreter and Wardrobe Assistant
- Event steward/ shop stall/ runner
- Digital content

Throughout the project volunteers have reported high levels of satisfaction. The entire volunteer team was awarded a certificate of appreciation at the Reading Volunteer Awards in June 2018, and the MPR has gained Investors in Volunteers status.

During the annual volunteer survey in 2018, 20 volunteers responded. Six had worked specifically as tour guides, six on Reading Abbey events and three on the Abbey interpretation. Other roles include family events, visitor welcome and donations, sewing and research and collections work. Thirteen of these volunteers had been recruited less than two years ago and four had volunteered for over four years. When asked about their motivations for volunteering, 11 wanted to gain new skills, nine volunteers wanted to share their skills, seven to improve their CV, six to socialise and 14 wanted to 'help a cause you love'.

When asked what they enjoy most about volunteering, volunteers were keen to learn new skills, to find out more about Reading's history and to be involved with the wider team:

*Gaining experience of working within a museum setting and being able to contribute to the success of the public programme for the RAR Project.*

*Researching different aspects connected with the Abbey project and taking tours in the Abbey Quarter, working with staff and volunteers.*

*Developing the skills needed to be a good tour guide, learning about Reading's history and being part of a dedicated and enthusiastic team.*

Volunteers

When asked about what was least enjoyable, assorted comments were made, including the cold in the archaeology store and the 'clanky computer which wastes a lot of time'. For tour guide volunteers, the occasional lack of visitors was a factor. When asked for improvements, volunteers suggested that it would be useful to be kept up to date with changes in the museum so that they can inform visitors.

In the 2021 Museums Partnership Reading annual volunteer survey, 33 of the volunteers who responded had been involved with *Reading Abbey Revealed*, fulfilling a wider range of roles than the survey in 2018, including new roles developed through the project. Nine were Abbey Quarter tour guides or sweepers; seven in the sewing group; five supported events; four each of costumed interpreter, heritage custodian and outreach with Abbey or Museum on wheels; one each of community engagement volunteer, wardrobe assistant, research and gardening<sup>11</sup>. Four volunteers had been involved less than 12 months; seven between 2-3 years; six between 3-4 years, five between 5-10 years and one 10-15 years. Volunteers were recruited through a range of routes such as adverts on Reading Museum and MERL websites, Twitter, through Reading Voluntary Action, word of mouth, University of Reading careers event, or through events or during visits to the museum.

Volunteers selected from a range of suggested motivations for volunteering: interest in the subject/project, 22 people; giving back something to the community (e.g. applying existing skills; working with children), 12 people; socialising/ making new friends, 8 people; finding a hobby on retirement, 8 people; to do something completely different, 7 people; love working in this field, 7 people; gaining new skills, 6 people; gaining confidence, 3 people; work experience/placement/DoE, 1 person.

These responses were mirrored in the volunteer focus group discussion, where volunteers also said wanted to give something to society, wanted to be sociable, to carry on learning and, for those after retirement, be engaged and active:

*I got into volunteering here by accident - when I retired I missed work and looked to volunteer locally and the museum were the only people that came back to me. The social aspect of volunteering became important too and I became more and more interested in the history... I wanted to know more... I'm an avid junkie for information. It also allows me to give something back as I've had rather a charmed life - so volunteering fulfils a lot of things for me.*

*I come from a science background but have always been interested in history - particularly the Abbey history and Reading. I also like presenting - I have a background in working with students, so I am quite used to it, and thirdly I like to give back something - I have really benefitted in my life so want to give to others.*

Volunteers

Additional questions were added to the annual survey particularly to explore wellbeing. Volunteers were given a range of statements to respond to:

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<sup>11</sup> The responses will not all add up to 33 - some questions allowed multiple responses and some volunteers did not respond to all questions.



- GIVE: 31 people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: I feel that my volunteering with Museums Partnership Reading makes a worthwhile contribution to society
- KEEP LEARNING: 29 people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: I have learned new things through volunteering
- CONNECTION: 28 people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: I enjoy meeting other/ new people when volunteering
- TAKE NOTICE: 9 people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: I enjoy engaging with local heritage when I volunteer with Museums Partnership Reading
- BE ACTIVE: 10 people agreed or strongly agreed, but 6 disagreed with the statement: I have increased the amount physical activity I do through volunteering<sup>12</sup>

The importance of wellbeing and staying connected during lockdown has been an important aspect for volunteers. The Volunteer Co-ordinator and other staff have arranged online sessions and kept the team engaged through active work, such as costume making, or research.

*The sewing volunteers have been working on an Oscar Wilde panel during lockdown, using the Oh Beautiful World artwork<sup>13</sup> as inspiration. The ladies have all commented that the virtual catch ups and the planning of this panel have been a real lifeline in the pandemic as many of them were isolated.*

Learning Officer

When asked about any new skills that they had developed, 21 volunteers added a comment which included research skills; presentation and communication skills - such as engaging with different audiences and conveying information; deepening understanding of Reading's heritage; better understanding of how a museum works; team working; identifying plants; and sewing techniques and historical costumes. Other comments included:

*Learning about the costumes in collections. Making different costumes.*

*Learning embroidery stitches. Helping to make display panels.*

*Communication skills have improved and the understanding of the ins and outs of working in a museum.*

*Skills related to engaging with the public; learning and listening skills; learning new information quickly and utilising that information.*

*Working as part of a team, meeting and greeting visitors when assisting costumed interpreter.*

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<sup>12</sup> This is the only place that anyone disagreed. This coincides with lockdown restrictions due to Covid-19. Consequently, this will be an important area to monitor as opportunities for more on-site and outdoor volunteering increase in the coming months.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/explore/online-exhibitions/oh-beautiful-world>

*Greater appreciation of the history of Reading.*

Volunteers

Volunteers have received a variety of training throughout the duration of the project, including tour guiding, costumed interpretation, presentation skills, evaluation, and supervising interns, alongside updates and information sharing on the project. In addition to more structured training, volunteers have been shadowing each other or working together.

*I am yet to carry out any surveys during my time in both museums as a welcome visitor volunteer, but shadowing other volunteers has been incredibly helpful and has certainly shown me the basics.*

Volunteer

The survey asked about any training gaps. Four volunteers made suggestions; two proposed first aid, other suggestions were health and safety training in the Museum and Abbey Quarter; visitor surveys and inputting volunteer hours. One volunteer also suggested that volunteers could have better branded clothing.

Volunteers in the focus groups were also keen to continue their roles and learn more about the history of Reading.

Tour guides have a 'sweeper' or assistant to support them during sessions. This peer support has added to volunteers understanding of the historic content and the tour format, and 'sweepers' often also wish to conduct tours:

*I am a sheepdog for Abbey Tours [laughs]- trying to learn enough so I can become an actual tour guide!*

Volunteer

The costumed interpretation team has been a highlight for many people. The volunteers animate the Abbey Ruins site and also engage and inform visitors. They have taken part in sessions with schools and young people as well as during special events such as Water Fest. The care with recruitment, training, their costumes and the roles the volunteers portray gives the volunteers great pride and pleasure:

*I'm still amazed by the quality of the training and the effort that went into it. I had to apply as if for a job, had an interview, two auditions. My costume was made for me and I had 14 (!) different parts of my body measured to get it correct to fit me. We had a day's training with the leading providers of heritage interpretation in the country.*

Volunteer



*Volunteer costumed interpreters*

The roles continue to develop and volunteers carry on deepening their own knowledge of their characters. They also find that visitors respond very positively. Several characters are ‘down to earth’ such as a medieval laundry-woman.

*One thing that is lovely is when visitors can relate to what you are saying - not modern high-tech stuff - they can relate to their own experience (with washing)...and make links between then and now... and what happens in other parts of the world*

Volunteer

Volunteers enjoy meeting visitors and engaging them in different ways.

*For me I've always been fascinated, almost addicted, by history and also really enjoy breaking down complex pieces of history and interpreting them so people can understand what was going on. People might have heard the term 'dissolution' but not understand what it means in practice.*

Volunteer

However, the volunteers also learn from visitors, and many enjoy that interaction and have time to listen to visitors ‘*in a way that staff don't have time to*’. They recounted stories from visitors that had added to their own understanding:

*We had one tour from a care home - and an amazing lady who remembered the bomb going off outside the museum (which we knew about) but what we didn't know is there was a hat shop nearby and she told us that there were hats spread everywhere.*

*On one Abbey Gateway tour we had a big group with several children...they were from a church and they told us that the Gateway had been used as their church years before - some of the young adults had been baptised*

*there and were showing their own children. They said they often had to clear up after Saturday night discos held there before the service.*

The Museums Partnership Reading with the MERL to recruit, manage and train volunteers appears to be working well. Feedback from volunteers has been positive so far, and during closure periods and lockdowns, online activities were encouraged. Volunteers can sign up for sessions and check the planner, and the system automatically records their volunteering hours. This seems to be well received by some volunteers:

*There is an app where you can sign up for slots to volunteer and can see your timetable and what works for you and know what's happening in advance.*

*That has been very useful and made a big difference and it records the time you do - so you don't have to add that in yourself.*

Volunteers

A folder with information about the Reading Museum and Abbey Ruins and volunteering opportunities is made available at the weekly citizenship ceremonies.

Volunteers made a number of suggestions for consideration:

- Winter research projects for volunteers to provide content for resources, exhibitions or to generate content behind QR codes.
- Dressing up opportunities for children e.g. to support the costumed interpreters to stop people stealing the washing when the laundress is working.
- A children's Abbey tour linked with the schools workshop on site.
- Volunteer only special tours for peer learning opportunities and personal development.
- Wider information about the museums and events programmes to enable volunteers to inform visitors.
- On St James's day in July undertake a pilgrimage to St Anne's shrine in Caversham, and develop other links with the Pilgrimage Trust.
- Take part in films for the website and schools programme.



## 4. Outcomes for communities

### 4.1 More and a wider range of people will be involved with heritage

#### *Engagement numbers*

Throughout the period of the project, a total of 350,429 people have been engaged with *Reading Abbey Revealed* related activities.

**Table 2: Visitor figures, July 2016 - October 2021**

<b>Large-scale events in the Abbey Quarter</b> (e.g. the re-opening festival, In Ruins performances, Abbey 900)	45,320
<b>Formal learning</b> (e.g. schools sessions, teachers INSET/CPD, Take Over Days etc.)	3,040
<b>Informal learning</b> (talks, tours, adult workshops, family activities)	4,327
<b>Abbey on Wheels / Museum outreach</b>	20,698
<b>Visits to <i>The Story of Reading</i> exhibition<sup>14</sup></b>	206,033
<b>Online visits to Abbey Quarter website</b>	70,880
<b>Volunteers supporting the Activity Plan</b>	131
<b>Total</b>	<b>350,429</b>

The project has also had a wide reach on online and on social media:

- The *Reading Abbey Revealed* Facebook page has grown from 793 followers in September 2016 to 1,719 in September 2021.
- The Twitter feed has grown from 419 followers in September 2016 to 2,681 in September 2021.

These numbers do not reflect informal engagement with Abbey Ruins - people who casually read the interpretation panels as they walk around the Abbey Quarter or residents wandering though the Ruins on a lunch break.

However, RBC has been collecting monthly estimates of footfall in the Abbey Quarter based on mobile phone data. As can be seen in table 3 below, these suggest that an average of 548,333 people walked through the Abbey Quarter each month in 2020, rising to 687,700 in 2021.

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<sup>14</sup> Based on visitors to Reading Museum from February 2018 when *The Story of Reading* exhibition opened

**Table 3: Abbey Quarter monthly footfall, January 2020 - October 2021**

Abbey Quarter monthly footfall	2020	2021	% increase from 2020 to 2021
January	1,203,000	261,000	-78.30%
February	1,092,000	339,000	-68.96%
March	676,000	538,000	-20.41%
April	122,000	612,000	401.64% <sup>15</sup>
May	176,000	729,000	314.20%
June	214,000	667,000	211.68%
July	384,000	789,000	105.47%
August	515,000	866,000	68.16%
Sept	625,000	939,000	50.24%
October	650,000	1,137,000	74.92%
November	424,000	977,000	130.42%
December	499,000		
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,580,000</b>	<b>6,877,000</b>	

### *Visitor demographics*

Evaluation data collected throughout the project provides a snapshot of who has been engaging with *Reading Abbey Revealed*. The data shows that activities such as booked talks and tours<sup>16</sup> are most likely to appeal to audiences who are female, over 56 and White British. Large-scale events such as Abbey 900 attract a wider audience, with people from more diverse ethnic backgrounds and younger age groups attending.

It is important to note too that these numbers do not include outreach work such as Abbey on Wheels, the storytelling project with Brighter Futures for Children or the Youth Panel (all covered later in this chapter) which specifically target under-represented audiences.

The following tables summarise the key demographic data from evaluation collected during the project.

<sup>15</sup> Start of Covid lockdown in 2020

<sup>16</sup> Based on feedback forms from the conservation tours, Heritage Open Days, talks programme and evaluation postcards collected at tours, Museum and Abbey Quarter visits.

**Table 4: Gender of visitors (percentage and absolute number)**

	Conservation tours	Accessible talks	Heritage Open Days	Tours and visitors to the Ruins	Abbey 900
<b>Female</b>	47.3% (52)	78.2% (93)	55.4% (31)	59.7% (71)	73.5% (50)
<b>Male</b>	32.7% (36)	20.2% (24)	44.6% (25)	39.5% (47)	25.0% (17)
<b>No reply</b>	20.0% (22)	1.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.8% (1)	1.5% (1)

Base: Conservation tours - 110; Accessible talks - 119; Heritage Open Days - 56; Evaluation postcards- 111; Reading 900 - 68

**Table 5: Age profile of visitors (percentage and absolute number)**

	Conservation tours	Accessible talks	Heritage Open Days	Tours and visitors to the Ruins *	Abbey 900
<b>16 - 25</b>	0.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	3.6% (2)	0.0% (0)	2.9% (2)
<b>26 - 35</b>	9.1% (10)	1.7% (2)	1.8% (1)	5.4% (6)	2.9% (2)
<b>36 - 45</b>	11.8% (13)	2.5% (3)	8.9% (5)	14.3% (17)	22.1% (15)
<b>46 - 55</b>	20.0% (22)	9.2% (11)	14.3% (8)	24.4% (29)	25.0% (17)
<b>56 - 65</b>	21.8% (24)	27.7% (33)	39.3% (22)	26.9% (32)	27.9% (19)
<b>66+</b>	17.3% (19)	57.1% (68)	32.1% (18)	28.6% (34)	19.1% (13)
<b>No reply</b>	19.0% (21)	1.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.8% (1)	0.0% (0)

Base: Conservation tours - 110; Accessible talks - 119; Heritage Open Days - 56; Evaluation postcards- 119; Reading 900 - 68

\* The age bands vary slightly in the evaluation postcards e.g. 26- 24, 25 - 34, 35 - 44, 45 - 54, 55 - 64, 65 - 74, 75+

**Table 6: Ethnicity of visitors (percentage and absolute number)**

	Conservation tours	Accessible talks	Heritage Open Days	Tours and visitors to the Ruins	Abbey 900
<b>White British</b>	73.6% (81)	94.1% (112)	80.4% (45)	83.1% (99)	61.8% (42)
<b>White Irish</b>	1.8% (2)	0.0% (0)	5.4% (3)	4.2% (5)	0.0% (0)
<b>White Other</b>	3.6% (4)	2.5% (3)	7.1% (4)	6.7% (8)	10.3% (7)
<b>Mixed</b>	0.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	1.8% (1)	0.0% (0)	1.5% (1)
<b>Black or Black British</b>	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	14.7% (10)
<b>Asian or Asian British</b>	1.8% (2)	0.0% (0)	1.8% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.4% (5)
<b>Chinese</b>	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	1.8% (1)	0.8% (1)	0.0% (0)
<b>No Reply</b>	18.2% (20)	3.4% (4)	1.8% (1)	5.0% (6)	4.4% (3)

Base: Conservation tours - 110; Accessible talks - 119; Heritage Open Days - 56; Evaluation postcards- 119; Reading 900 - 68

Although these demographics do not necessarily reflect the wider range of audiences which have engaged with the project through the schools programme and outreach work, museum staff are conscious that there is still more work to do in reaching a wider audience.

The success of outreach work like Abbey on Wheels was hindered by the Covid-19 outbreak, but feedback from public events like the re-opening festival and Abbey

900 suggest that the Abbey Ruins and wider Abbey Quarter are much more welcoming and accessible to non-traditional heritage audiences.

*Making sure that we reach hard to reach audiences is still an area of challenge for us, but I do think that it's changing. The Abbey Quarter is a less threatening environment for people. It's easier to invite families and people from different parts of Reading into the Abbey area, rather than into the museum, because they feel less intimidated it.*

Marketing and Learning Officer

The Museum team have been undertaking extensive work researching and updating their Access Policy and Plan so that it focuses more on intellectual access and understanding and addressing the barriers that different audiences experience. A number of other projects that have taken place through the grant period, for example programming around Windrush Day with partners such as Barbados Museum and Historical Society, Reading's Caribbean Association Group and the Alliance for Racial Cohesion and Equality, have informed the new policy and approaches.

### ***Volunteer demographics***

The Reading Abbey Revealed volunteers are part of the wider team of Museums Partnership Reading (MPR). In an annual review of the MRP volunteers 111 individuals were included. 75 identified as female including trans women; 32 male including trans men; 2 non-binary (e.g. androgyne; 1 person preferred not to say and 1 was unknown).

Eight volunteers were 19 years old or below; 21 were 20-34 years old; 10 were 35-49; 22 were 50-64 years old; 48 were 65-74 years old and 2 preferred not to say.

86 identified as White British; 2 as White Irish; 4 as any other White; 2 as Indian; 1 as Chinese; 1 as other mixed ethnicity; 1 any other ethnicity and 4 people preferred not to say.

### ***Website and social media***

*Reading Abbey Revealed* has had a significant impact online and on social media.

A website dedicated to the Abbey Quarter<sup>17</sup> was launched in November 2018. It includes information about the history of the Ruins, an interactive map of the Abbey Quarter, event and 'what's on' listings, visitor information and details about school sessions. Since November 2018, the website has been visited 70,880 times, with the pages being viewed on 176,679 different occasions. Website statistics show that 9.6% of page views are of the 'what's on' page; 8.8% the 'visit' page; and 7.8% of the history of the Abbey Quarter page.

On Twitter, Reading Abbey has 2,681 followers. Since November 2018, Reading Abbey Quarter tweets have been seen just over half a million times (534,012 impressions). This increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, with tweets being seen 350,824 times (65% of the total impressions since November 2018) as the museum used social media to share the Abbey with audiences during the lockdown.

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<sup>17</sup> [www.readingabbeyquarter.org.uk](http://www.readingabbeyquarter.org.uk)



Reading Abbey also enjoyed some high profile shares from other organisations through the Reading Museum Twitter account, with several threads receiving hundreds of likes<sup>18</sup>. An online exhibition on the Reading Museum website '*From Music to Magic: Reading Abbey's most famous manuscript*' received particular support across social media and was shared by the British Library to their social feeds.

On Facebook, Reading Abbey Quarter has 1,719 followers and since November 2018, posts have reached an audience of 33,188 people. Facebook's analytics show that the Abbey is reaching a wide audience from around the region - whilst 48.7% of users are in Reading, many more are in the surrounding area (2.7% Wokingham; 2.6% Tilehurst; 2.3% Woodley; 2.2% London; 1.9% Earley; 1.5% Newbury).

Since March 2020, Facebook posts have reached 27,165 people (81.9% of the total), again, showing the success the project has had in sustaining audience engagement over the final years of the project.

### ***Abbey on Wheels***

The Abbey on Wheels<sup>19</sup>, a portable pop up display about the Abbey Quarter's history and the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project, was a real highlight of the project, reaching new audiences and getting people excited about the Ruins in the lead up to their re-opening. Because it was so successful in engaging non-visitors with Ruins, the Museum subsequently extended and is still continuing the programme as Museum on Wheels<sup>20</sup>.

The original Abbey on Wheels display included object handling based on loan boxes, virtual reality headsets showing 360 degree photographs taken during the conservation and a tile decorating activity, with images of real Abbey tiles printed out as inspiration. Leaflets about the medieval history of geographical areas of Reading were produced instead of the fixed panels suggested by the Activity Plan as these were easier to transport and more accessible to visitors to read at busy community venues.

In the lead up to the re-opening of the Ruins, Abbey on Wheels toured 8 community venues and 11 community festivals, including Forbury Fiesta, South Reading Churches Fun Day, East Reading Festival, Central Library Rhymetime and Whitley Wood Over 50s Social Club over the past two years. A total of 16,938 people engaged with Abbey on Wheels through 2017/18.

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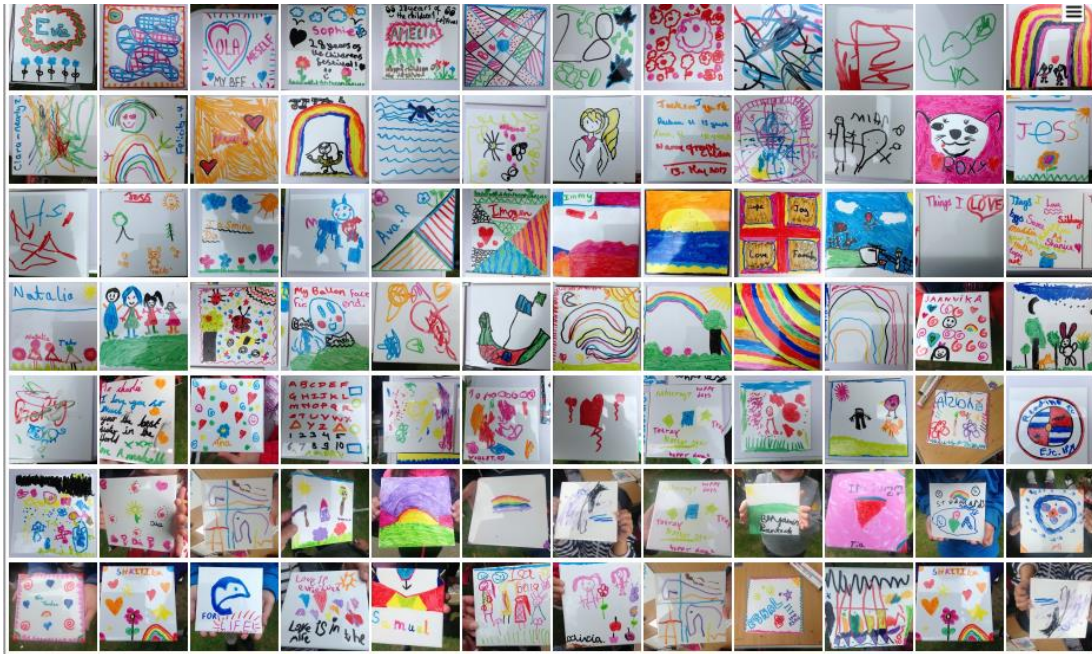
<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/readingmuseum/status/1405879377863315460>

<https://twitter.com/britishlibrary/status/1407389969606397955>

<https://twitter.com/readingmuseum/status/1404740232076009472>

<sup>19</sup> [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/rolling-around-reading-abbey-on-wheels](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/rolling-around-reading-abbey-on-wheels)

<sup>20</sup> [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/museum-on-wheels-year-on-road](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/museum-on-wheels-year-on-road)



Tiles created by Abbey on Wheels participants in 2018

Evaluation which took place throughout the project in 2017/18 showed that 98% of respondents to the survey had an enjoyable experience, with 88% saying they had a very enjoyable experience. People said they had learnt something interesting about heritage during their time with Abbey on Wheels. A visual recording exercise using comment cards and sticky fabric recorded feedback to the question ‘have you learnt anything interesting today?’ Comments included:

*People think Reading is just shopping and stuff. It’s amazing!*

*Have lived in Reading all my life and only just found out that Queen Elizabeth the 1<sup>st</sup> had a place behind the Abbey Gate.*

*Never realised how big the Abbey was in its day!*

*Charlotte loved decorating her tile and is looking forward to visiting the Abbey Ruins soon.*

Comments from Abbey on Wheels visitors

The Abbey Ruins Virtual Reality (VR) experience was initially trialled as part of #DigiRDG - a collaborative project between Reading Museum and the MERL. It was particularly successful in engaging with a wide range of people, especially teenagers and young people, who might otherwise have thought the Ruins were not for them. For people who didn’t have the ability to travel to the Abbey Ruins it was also invaluable as they felt included.

*I found it really nice just talking to different people. There were the usual people, but then you’d get a whole gang of teenage boys who would see the VR and go ‘what’s that? that’s really cool’. There is no way that I’d be having a conversation about Reading Abbey with these kids without the technology.*

Museum Manager

At a 2018 trip to the weekly Age UK coffee morning for older and vulnerable adults for example, volunteers gave a talk about the history of the Abbey, facilitated object handling and using the virtual reality headsets, encouraged reminiscing about visiting the Ruins before they closed. The visit was so popular with Age UK users and so easy to organise, that the Museum on Wheels returned in 2019 for a second visit.

*Everyone loved hearing about the history of the Ruins, but the virtual reality was particularly popular. We all loved being able to see the Ruins and to see the views. Hearing about the Abbey Ruins encouraged lots of nostalgia and reminiscing about visiting when people were younger.*

Pop-in Coordinator, Age UK Reading

A team of eight volunteers supported Abbey on Wheels over summer 2018, with volunteer hours totalling 84. Figures for 2017 totalled 30. Abbey on Wheels also enabled Museum staff to get more involved in community outreach, with many Museum staff involved in supporting the project.

The evaluation report by Community Engagement Intern Alison Afzal noted the key successes of Abbey on Wheels during its first phase:

*The most successful aspect of the Abbey on Wheels project was that it allowed Museum staff and volunteers to go out to communities and speak to local residents about the Abbey Quarter project and the history of Reading. It broke down the barriers that may stop residents from travelling into town and visiting the museum to find out this information in the traditional way (e.g. cost, health and mobility etc.).*

*The Abbey being closed for nearly 10 years meant that people were not allowed to access the site. Talking to long term Reading residents, the Abbey had almost slipped from memory hidden away behind office blocks. Some more recent Reading residents, including many children had no idea it even existed. It also allowed community groups who don't have the funds to be a part of the loan box scheme to have an object handling session at their community groups/venues. It provided a free activity taking the pressure off their volunteers and funds. It was a really good way of promoting events and encouraging new and repeat visits to the museum and Abbey Quarter.*

Reading Abbey Revealed intern

Abbey on Wheels was so successful in engaging people outside of the Museum walls that it expanded as part of the MPR in 2019 to become Museum on Wheels and to include new local history subjects such as Huntley and Palmers, Reading at War and Insects. With additional funding from the Earley Charity, Museum on Wheels visited another 16 venues in 2019, reaching 6,403 people.

Museum on Wheels was put on hold during the 2020 Covid-19 restrictions, but is now starting to attend local events again such as Abbey 900, Forbury Fiesta and Waterway Wellbeing Day. Once again, appearing at events like these reminded Reading residents that, post Covid-19 lockdowns, the Museum and Abbey are here and open to them.

A particular success of Museum on Wheels is that in addition to bringing the Abbey Ruins and the museum collections to people who might not usually visit, it has

strengthened the museum's relationships with local community organisations such as Age UK, the Indian Community Centre, the Globe Luncheon Club and PACT (Parents and Children Together) - all of whom work with people from ethnically diverse backgrounds and/ or have low incomes. This is further helping the Museum to improve access to under-represented audiences and has fed into the new Access Policy and Plan.

Museum on Wheels is now largely supported by volunteers (who are all trained in how to deliver object handling, craft activities and VR headset demos), but still needs staff to co-ordinate and manage the sessions. This has proved challenging at times and Museum on Wheels can be difficult to deliver within the limited resources of the Museum learning team.

However, the programme has worked so well as an outreach tool that the Museum want to obtain funding for it as a permanent strand of their National Portfolio partnership with the MERL.

*We still recognise there we have to go out to people. It isn't all about coming to us, we still need that outreach. Taking Museum on Wheels out to different locations, to different community groups is important and we want to continue that.*

Museum Manager

The success of Museum on Wheels is also illustrated in two museum blog posts about the programme.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Working with looked after children - Stories of Reading Abbey***

The *Reading Abbey Revealed* team partnered with local children's services organisation, Brighter Futures for Children, on a creative writing project to produce a children's book about Reading Abbey in May 2019.

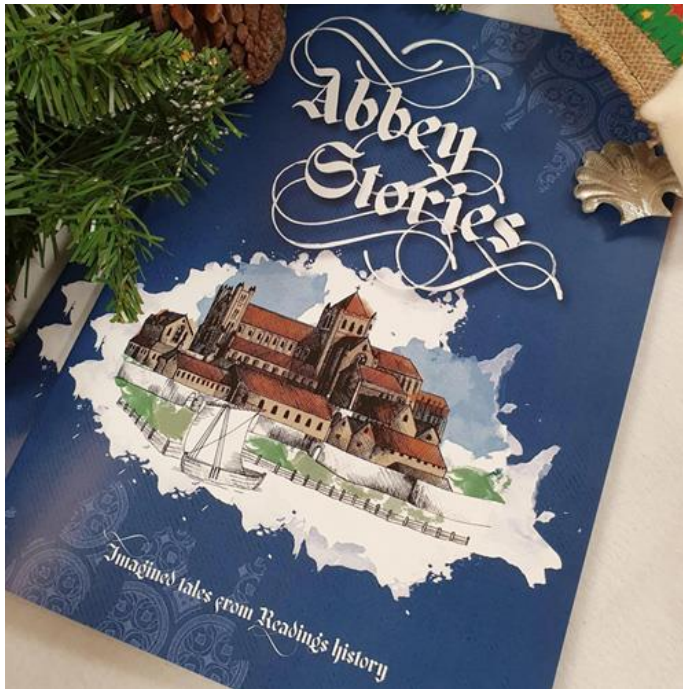
A group of 10 looked after children, aged 6 -12 years old, were invited to spend a day visiting the Abbey, meeting volunteer costumed characters, learning about its history and devising their own characters and stories about the people who might have lived there. Local storyteller, Cath Edwards, then drew from the children's work to create four imagined stories from Reading's history.

The illustrated stories were published as *Abbey Stories* in December 2019 and are for sale in Reading Museum's shop. The children were presented with a copy of the book and a Discover Arts Award at a celebration event attended by the Lead Councillor for Children's Services.

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<sup>21</sup> [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/rolling-around-reading-abbey-on-wheels](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/rolling-around-reading-abbey-on-wheels)  
[www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/museum-on-wheels-year-on-road](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/museum-on-wheels-year-on-road)





*Abbey Stories, written by Cath Edwards with local children*

The Participation Officer from Brighter Futures for Children admits she was sceptical about the project at first, but *'the children loved it, they were 100% engaged'*. The museum team put a lot of effort into making the children feel welcome and bringing the Abbey alive. The workshop was held in the school holidays and importantly, *'did not feel like 'learning''*.

An important outcome of the project for Brighter Futures for Children was that it created a safe space for children in care to come together, to learn about where they live and to generate happy memories. This is particularly important for looked after children who may not have had many opportunities to create positive childhood memories to look back on.

*Spending time together was very special for the children. It allowed them to be themselves and to have a lovely, memorable day. And they have a high quality book as a permanent reminder of their visit. The children were so proud of Abbey Stories - and their carers too.*

Participation Officer, Brighter Futures for Children

One volunteer costumed interpreter commented about the project:

*One session I did was Matilda the Empress - it was a special session with looked after children. That was really worthwhile engaging with the children. They asked us questions, completed their work-books and when the whole thing was finished they were presented with a book. I thought that was brilliant whoever thought of that.*

Volunteer

## ***Working with young people - the Youth Panel***

The *Reading Abbey Revealed* project team set up a Youth Panel in 2018 to engage young people in activities, programmes and projects at the Abbey Ruins and to involve them in decision making.

The panel initially attracted interest from university students rather than secondary school students and wasn't as successful as hoped. However, the team learnt from this experience, particularly young people's motivations and attendance patterns, and relaunched the panel in June 2020 in partnership with the MERL specifically aiming at 14 - 19 year olds. Working with partners like No. 5 Young People and local schools the panel is now reaching an average of five to ten members each month.

Museum staff learned that many young people are motivated by gaining practical work experience for their CV. They wanted to learn marketing and digital skills linked to heritage and to participate in activities that would give them skills and confidence to apply for university and jobs. As a result of this, the Museum created opportunities for the panel to contribute to events and exhibitions such as Abbey 900, the Festival 50 exhibition and Virtual Takeover Day where they posted facts, information and images about Reading history.

Feedback from the Youth Panel illustrates how successful the relaunched panel has been, with members reporting learning new skills, increased confidence and connection to their local community.

*For me, the Youth Panel was an opportunity to gain some much needed confidence by surrounding myself with new people who also shared the same love for history. After a few meetings and sharing ideas with one another, I could already feel myself growing more assured and more willing to give my thoughts. The Youth Panel is a safe place to give opinions and be listened to. The 900th anniversary of Reading Abbey provided the chance to learn about integral parts of the history of Reading that are not talked about as often as they should be. That is the wonderful thing about the Youth Panel, I am finding out things about where I live that I did not know anything about!*

*The museum Youth Panel, for me, has been a great way to develop my skills while getting involved with the local community and learning more about Reading's history, which is absolutely fascinating. My favourite thing which I have had the opportunity to do as part of the Youth Panel is to help in the Museum on Wheels at the Abbey 900 celebration, in which we told visitors about the history of Reading Abbey and were able to see all the different stalls as we took photos for social media. Through the Youth Panel I have developed skills in working collaboratively, social media (doing the takeover is a great example of this) and communication.*

Youth Panel members

An unexpected impact of the Covid-19 restrictions is that the Youth Panel has flourished through using online technology. The Abbey Learning Officer notes that this has made it easier for young people to participate:

*We learned a great deal in timing and the use of online conferencing options. It's been an easy way for many people to have access to our*

*meetings, consultations and sessions which can sometimes be impeded by travel... As a way to overcome the initial worry about coming to a new place and meeting new people for the first time I think that online formats can certainly help ease social anxiety in young people which we can certainly use in the future.*

Abbey Learning Officer

Based on the success of the past 18 months, the Museum plans to continue to offer a blended approach of online and face-to-face meetings with the Youth Panel and to develop activities and programmes that support their needs with heritage and their future careers.

## 4.2 Your organisation will be more resilient

### ***Partnerships***

The Museum has worked in partnership with the University of Reading throughout *Reading Abbey Revealed*. Starting off with research support for the new interpretation in the Museum and Abbey Ruins, the partnership has since grown stronger through joint activities such as talks, exhibitions and schools work. Most recently, the Museum worked with Professor Anne Lawrence-Mathers, Professor of Medieval History at the University, on an online exhibition about the medieval song 'Sumer is icumen in', which was discovered in a manuscript from Reading Abbey.<sup>22</sup>

The University of Reading and Reading Museum also successfully applied for funding for a PhD studentship on the history of the Abbey to start in 2021. Titled *Reading Abbey: Connecting Archaeology, Heritage Management and Placemaking*, the PhD is jointly supervised by Reading Museum, Berkshire Archaeology and the University of Reading's archaeology department. It will explore the archaeological history of the Abbey and how it can be used to improve the interpretation and management of the site. The PhD illustrates both the strength of the partnership with the University and how *Reading Abbey Revealed* has kick started a new round of interest and research into the history of the Abbey.

The shared volunteer team between the MERL and Reading Museum is an invaluable resource with over 175 volunteers currently registered. This provides opportunities for joint timetabling and sharing resources and training events. Volunteers can also access opportunities to work between locations - enabling them to widen their understanding of Reading's heritage and to share their skills.

### ***Increased financial resilience***

The conservation and re-opening of the Abbey Ruins through *Reading Abbey Revealed* has also contributed to greater financial resilience. The Abbey Ruins are available for commercial and private hire - bringing in much-needed additional revenue to cover their ongoing maintenance and sustainability. Commercial events in the Forbury Gardens and Ruins have included a Twilight Trail (2020), performances by Rabble Theatre and Progress Theatre (2019 and 2021), Summer Cinema Screen, Blue Collar food Festival, Down at Abbey Festival (2019 and 2021) and the Children's Festival (2019 and 2021).

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/explore/online-exhibitions/reading-abbey-most-famous-manuscript>

As part of a grant from the Cultural Recovery Fund, Reading Borough Council has commissioned a Business and Marketing Plan for the Abbey Quarter. This will explore how the area can be better marketed and used to generate income to cover its upkeep. This will help to make the Ruins as sustainable as possible over the long term.

A new Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District was established in 2019 which also brings investment into the Quarter.

#### **4.3 The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit**

##### ***A raised profile for heritage***

Another success of the project has been the establishment of the ‘Abbey Quarter’ area and its growing profile with local people, organisations and businesses. The re-opened Abbey Ruins, well-branded interpretation and signage and vibrant onsite activity programme have firmly placed the Abbey Quarter on the cultural map of Reading.

With this, there has been a wider recognition that heritage can be a successful economic driver for Reading. The new Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District (BID), for example, was established and the Abbey Quarter and its heritage is now included in Reading Borough Council’s local plan. The museum also partnered with Network Rail in 2020 to promote the 180th anniversary of Reading Station with a series of interpretative ‘Welcome to the Abbey Quarter’ panels further raising the heritage profile of the area.

*There was no such thing as the Abbey Quarter before this project, but now people call it that naturally. There is a Business Improvement District for the Abbey Quarter; it’s referred to by the press as the Abbey Quarter. It’s got this excitement now. Before no one had made that connection that the area was anything more than the Ruins, but now it’s bringing together that entire amazing heritage in one package.*

Museum Manager

In collaboration with Reading UK CIC, the Reading Tourism Group is also now promoting the Abbey Quarter as a key part of their destination offer. The Abbey Quarter is an Ambassador of the ‘Great West Way’ initiative, a new 125-mile touring route between London and Bristol<sup>23</sup>. These will both raise the profile of Reading Museum and Abbey Ruins further and encourage even more partnership working between regional venues.

Reading Gaol’s future as a cultural site has been enhanced by the success of the Abbey Ruins project. The Museum has supported Theatre & Arts Reading and RBC in their bid to open the Gaol as an arts hub to protect and share the heritage, and Reading Borough Council considers the Gaol site as part of the wider cultural plans for the Abbey Quarter.

The success of the Abbey Ruins project has been recognised through various awards, including:

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<sup>23</sup> [www.greatwestway.co.uk](http://www.greatwestway.co.uk)



- Royal Town Planning Institute 2018 South East Award for Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture (where the judges said they were particularly impressed by the extent that Reading's heritage is seen as a catalyst for positive change and that the Abbey Quarter is at the heart of the town's cultural renaissance)
- Shortlisted for the Royal Institute of Chartered surveyors Awards South East 2019 in the 'Building Conservation' category
- Two awards at Reading Cultural Awards 2019 - for 'Celebrating Reading's heritage' and 'Partnership in the Arts' categories
- Highly Commended at the 2020 Civic Trust AABC Conservation Awards
- Won the Planning Awards 2020 for the 'Best use of Heritage in Placemaking'.
- Green Flag Awards for Forbury and Abbey Ruins October 2021. Both received special heritage awards.

### ***Support and increased profile within Reading Borough Council***

The success of *Reading Abbey Revealed* is also a result of collaboration with a wide range of other RBC services that have all supported the vision for the Abbey Quarter.

For example, collaboration with the Highways and Transport teams meant that the project was able to implement a comprehensive and user-friendly interpretation signage scheme in both the Abbey Quarter and parts of the wider town centre. The Parks team helped with the design of the landscaping of Reading Abbey, ensuring that it complements Forbury Gardens and can be maintained over the long term. The development, promotion and delivery of the new events on the site that have made it more accessible to the community are thanks to collaboration with the events, communication and Reading Arts teams. The aims and objectives of the project and the Abbey Quarter vision have all-party political support on RBC - ensuring that Reading's heritage is at the heart of the community.

This collaboration between council services and external key partners is the model being used for the current Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) programme. This is a heritage-led regeneration initiative lead by Historic England, working with local councils and communities to create economic growth and improve the quality of life in our historic high streets. The initiative provides physical interventions to buildings, including repair, reinstating lost historic features and supporting the conversion of historic buildings for new uses, and improvement to the public realm including wayfinding schemes. The Reading HSHAZ scheme brings together activities and projects that will support the growth and development of three conservation areas: Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street, and Market Place/London Street (partly within the Abbey Quarter). The Reading HSHAZ is a £1.6m programme running between 2020 and 2024.

The Mayor of Reading's office has been supportive of the work and actively involved and giving support at various stages of the project, such as meeting children in the first schools Take Over Day.



*Young people meet the Mayor of Reading*

Most recently, in 2021, the Mayor conducted a tour of the Abbey Ruins which was filmed by a volunteer and is currently available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOnEUBl9wzA>

### ***Pride in Reading's history***

Since it's reopening in 2018, after almost ten years closure, the Abbey Ruins has become a key location for cultural events, bringing pride and an increased sense of identity to local people.

Alongside the new interpretation and signage, events and activities run as part of the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project such as the re-opening festival, *In Ruins*, Abbey 900, tours and family activities have all collectively raised the profile of Reading's heritage and given people a sense of pride in the town.

Feedback from people<sup>24</sup> attending Abbey 900 evidences this sense of community identity and pride:

- 65.4% agreed or strongly agreed that the activity they attended reflected the diversity, culture and heritage of Reading, with 21.8% strongly agreeing.
- 66.7% agreed or strongly agreed that Abbey 900 brought Reading communities together, with 28.2% strongly agreeing.
- 74.4% agreed or strongly agreed that Abbey 900 helped to increase their pride in Reading, with 26.9% strongly agreeing (75.3% lived in the borough of Reading and 32.7% lived in wider Berkshire).

The growing profile of the Abbey Ruins is also illustrated by the increased numbers of external cultural organisations using the space, some of which draw from the history of the site itself. Rabble Theatre, for example, have written four plays

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<sup>24</sup> Based on feedback questionnaires from 78 people attending Abbey 900

inspired by Reading history, with ‘The Last Abbot’, about Abbey monk Hugh Faringdon recently being performed at the Abbey Ruins to sell-out audiences and positive reviews from publications such as *The Guardian*<sup>25</sup>. The success of ‘The Last Abbot’ highlights the growing pride Reading has in the Abbey and in its history - something which has largely been facilitated by *Reading Abbey Revealed*.

*It was a really brilliant idea that The Last Abbot was staged in the ruins - it pulled in more people to the site. It was the right location for the play, with strong links to the story and people could also explore the Abbey site.*

Volunteer

*There’s been a new confidence in using Reading’s heritage to tell Reading stories that might not have been there ten years ago. We’ve seen it growing across the cultural sector in Reading, not just in ‘heritage’.*

Museum Manager

Tapping into increased pride in Reading’s history and financial resilience, Reading Museum has commissioned more Reading themed items for the museum shop in recent years. They have worked, for example, with local artists to create shop lines celebrating local heroes like Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde, as well as the Reading lion in Forbury Gardens.



*Rabble Theatre Company perform The Last Abbot in the Abbey Ruins*

### ***Attracting further funding***

The *Reading Abbey Revealed* project has given Reading Museum experience and credibility in developing, managing and promoting a successful and ambitious cultural project, and of Reading as a cultural and heritage destination.

As a result of the project, Reading’s culture and heritage team has developed a strong relationship and level of trust with major national funding organisations

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<sup>25</sup> [www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/18/the-last-abbot-of-reading-review-abbey-ruins](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/18/the-last-abbot-of-reading-review-abbey-ruins)



such as NLHF, Arts Council England (ACE) and Historic England (HE) over the past ten years. The staff who delivered the project are seen as a safe pair of hands who can enthusiastically and creatively deliver high quality projects and Reading is now on the map as a place to invest in culture and heritage.

The reputation and experience of the team has translated into a range of successful funding applications for further cultural and heritage projects in Reading, including:

- Refectory wall restoration: 2017-2018, £200,000 funding from Historic England
- Reading Place of Culture: 2017 to 2021, a £754,920 project with a £558,400 from NLHF, Arts Council England and Historic England.
- Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone: 2020 to 2024, a £1.6m project with a £836,500 funding from Historic England to revitalise the historic buildings in the centre of Reading.
- Abbey Quarter events and activity funding: 2020-2021, with a £80,000 grant funding from NLHF and Historic England through their Cultural Recovery Fund programme.
- Arts Council England project grant of £15,000 to support specific cultural activities for the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey at Water Fest on the 19 June 2021.

These projects equate to a total of external funding of over £1.71 million in addition to the £1.77 million from NLHF for *Reading Abbey Revealed*.



*Summer Screen at the Abbey Ruins*



## 5. Project impacts and learning points

There have been many project highlights and successes, but also learning points, since *Reading Abbey Revealed* kicked off:

- The Abbey Ruins and Abbey Gateway have been successfully conserved using innovative conservation techniques such as sedum planting to cap the walls and hot-mixed lime mortar to stabilise the Abbey walls. The much-loved Ruins are now safely open to the public after almost ten years of closure.
- By expanding the project beyond the remaining ruins to include the original Reading Abbey footprint, *Reading Abbey Revealed* has created a new historic destination in Reading - the Abbey Quarter. New integrated interpretation and branding across the historic site has led to an increased sense of place and put heritage firmly on the map in Reading. This is exemplified by the growing footfall and range of cultural activity taking place in the Quarter, the creation of the Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District, as well as success in numerous historic and town planning awards.
- Public consultation and support has been crucial to the success of the project. Open Days, hard hat conservation tours, accessible talks, extensive interpretation testing and positive publicity created an early groundswell of local support for the conservation and re-opening of the Abbey Ruins. This built on the wide spread consultation for the NLHF Activity Plan (over 1,000 people responded to an online consultation survey) and has continued through outreach projects such as Abbey on Wheels.
- The re-opening of the Abbey Ruins in June 2018 was a great success, raising the profile of the site and the Abbey Quarter and attracting around 18,000 people. Successes include recruiting 36 new stewards to help, and positive feedback from stakeholders, volunteers and visitors.
- The Abbey on Wheels has been both a highlight and a model for outreach for the museum. Now Museum on Wheels, it is continuing to reach new audiences and to get people excited about Reading's history. It has also introduced the Museum to new organisations who they can partner with to reach more under-represented audiences.
- Visitor evaluation shows that the activity programme has successfully engaged people in their heritage. Visitors attending talks, tours, events such as Abbey 900 (attended by 324,041 people) have constantly rated their experience positively and 80% agreed that they had learned more about the history of Reading Abbey.<sup>26</sup>
- The schools programme has developed a new workshop 'Royals in Reading' which draws directly on the rich local and national history associated with the Abbey Ruins to provide a sense of place and time. A comprehensive set of downloadable written resources accompany the workshop. Additionally other resources have been produced for schools including creative writing, dance and music. The latter exploring the importance of music in Reading Abbey.

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<sup>26</sup> Based on 483 feedback forms from visitors to *Reading Abbey Revealed* talks, tours, events and Abbey 900.

- Relocating the Victorian Schoolroom to the Abbey Gateway has added a new sense of drama and history to the workshop session and has been well received by schools. The Gateway has also been used for a range of other events and programming.
- In response to the pandemic, the learning team have embraced blended learning approaches and have further developed their workshop sessions to make virtual workshops available to schools, consequently increasing their potential reach.
- A strong and dedicated staff team with vision and commitment has been key to the success of *Reading Abbey Revealed*. New staff dedicated to the project, such as the Volunteer Co-ordinator, Abbey Learning Officer and Abbey Community Engagement Officer, have also made a huge difference to what the team were able to deliver. The expertise of the team has been recognised in further successful funding applications.
- The volunteer team target of 35 has been well exceeded, with 131 volunteers now having contributed to the project. New volunteer roles have been added to the offer, such as Heritage Custodian. The volunteer team have remained engaged during the lockdown period and are keen to continue being involved. The new Reading Museums Partnership has provided a bigger pool of volunteers to engage with, and additionally a wider range of volunteering opportunities for the volunteers to select from.
- The new short-term internship model has been very successful, with all interns going into employment, including one as the Community Engagement Officer for the *Reading Abbey Revealed* project. The new model has fed into a re-examination of the recruitment process for museum staff so that it is more accessible to people from different backgrounds.
- Partnerships and support from Reading Borough Council, the University of Reading and the Friends have been important to maintaining the momentum of the project. The Museum also enjoyed a good relationship with the NLHF, Arts Council England and Historic England.
- Working with the same consultants for the interpretation and activity plan and evaluation has provided continuity on a difficult and complex project.
- Procurement processes have been complicated and a steep learning curve. Similarly, working with other departments at RBC such as Transport and Highways has been time consuming and challenging, but has ultimately paid off as the wayfinding system has been extended into other parts of Reading town centre.

## 6. Recommendations and opportunities

The evaluation process has thrown up a number of recommendations and opportunities to take forward over the next few years and beyond.

- Maintaining the site will be an ongoing challenge and the team have a sustainable long term Maintenance Plan to ensure that the Abbey Ruins don't fall into disrepair again. It will be important to remind both wider stakeholders and visitors that the Ruins are not just 'fixed' but will require ongoing care and conservation.
- A dedicated team of volunteers have been recruited and they are keen to remain active and involved in quieter 'winter' periods and also other times such as lockdowns or restricted opening. A further programme of social activities, information sharing sessions and other practical volunteering roles could be programmed to cover these periods.
- More research and work could be done on how to make the public programme sustainable e.g. what is a sensible and sustainable level of talks, tours and family activities related to the Abbey to run?
- Maintaining the links with the University of Reading will ensure that volunteering, ArtsLab, young archaeologists and other widening participation activities continue to reach new audiences and engage younger people.
- The Reading Abbey resources are already closely integrated into the learning programme. Ensuring that blended learning opportunities continue to be made available for schools enable teachers to remain engaged and make use of the Reading Abbey resources for their teaching. Online versions offer the added benefit of reaching new audiences further afield.
- Museum on Wheels has proved to be a very successful way of reaching people who don't usually engage with heritage, particularly in its use of VR, object handling and arts and craft activities. The programme should continue into the future, with the Museum sharing its learning with the wider heritage sector.
- Although Museum on Wheels has made great strides forward in reaching new and different audiences, evaluation suggests that many of the museum-focused activities still tend to attract an older, White audience. The Museum needs to build on the success of events like the opening festival, Water Fest and Abbey 900 and to use the Abbey Ruins to attract and welcome non-traditional heritage audiences. Reading Museum's new Access Policy and Plan will help to do this.