

Burial of Henry I, 1136

Painted by Harry Morley ACA (1881 - 1943), 1916

Object no. 1931. 280.1

Location - Bayeux Gallery, Museum of Reading



Henry I founded Reading Abbey in 1121 intending it to be his burial place. He died in Normandy in December 1135 and was brought back for burial in January 1136.

Henry I, youngest son of William the Conqueror, founded Reading Abbey in 1121. It was to be his burial place and memorial. He died in December 1135 after developing a sudden and painful fever. His body was embalmed and sewn into a bull's hide for the journey to Reading. Stormy weather in the Channel delayed the crossing to England by four weeks. His body was eventually brought up the River Kennet to the Abbey's wharf.

His funeral is shown in this painting and took place on 5 January 1136. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William of Corbeil is seen censing the catafalque. An effigy of the dead monarch has been placed on the bier. In the foreground kneels the new King, Stephen.

The Abbot of Reading, is shown seated on his throne in the chancel in front of a red hanging, although in fact at this date the post was vacant. On the canopy, above the head of the catafalque, is the shield of the Abbey bearing its later arms - the three scallop shells.

Henry was buried in front of the High Altar, the most prestigious location for a burial. The tomb did not survive the destruction of the Abbey after the Dissolution in 1539. During recent archaeological investigations a piece of carved stone was discovered, reused in the Abbey's precinct wall. This may be part of a twelfth century sarcophagus. It is just possible, though it can never be proved, that this might originally have formed part of Henry's tomb.