

Reading Abbey Background:

"Henry I built this monastery between the rivers Kennet and Thames in a spot calculated for the reception of almost all who might have occasion to reveal to the more populous cities of England" - William Malmesbury 12th century chronicler

1121- Henry I founds Reading Abbey

King Henry I announced that he wanted a new abbey built at Reading. The abbey would have a large and impressive church, and living quarters for dozens of monks, who would worship in the church.

The abbey would transform Reading forever turning a market town into an important religious centre known across Western Europe. Henry chose a site on the edge of the town on high ground between the River Kennet and the River Thames. The rivers would be used to transport stone during the building work. The major roads leading to reading would make it easy for pilgrims to travel to the abbey, and for Henry to visit as he travelled around his kingdom.

Historians suggest many reasons why Henry founded a new community:

- He had led a violent and turbulent life, and this was his way of trying to make his peace with God
- He was shaken by the death of his only legitimate heir, William who drowned in a shipwreck
- He wanted to create a place of burial for himself and his family
- He wanted to put his name to a large and impressive building, so his subjects would see how rich and powerful he was
- He wanted monks to pray for his soul after he was dead
- He wanted to be remembered by future generations

Building the Abbey

Reading abbey was built with flint for the core of the walls and stone for the elegant facings. Flint was dug locally, and the finest quality limestone was imported from Caen in France and Taynton in Oxfordshire. Stone was too heavy to transport long distances by road, so for most of the journey it was carried by boat. Lead was used to make the roofs watertight, for pipes and drains and to hold window glass in place. Ceramic tiles made on site or close by gave a smooth patterned floor.

No expense was spared in building Henry's abbey, the church and other buildings were designed to impress with their size beauty and magnificence. The architectural style is called Romanesque because it is similar to Roman buildings with strong walls and rounded arches. The Abbey church would be the fourth largest in England after the cathedrals of Winchester and London and the abbey church at Bury St Edmunds. To build such an enormous church and all the other Abbey buildings would take a small army of builders and a huge supply of building

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1136 - Henry I died before the abbey was complete and was buried near the high altar in 1136 the abbey and the ground immediately outside became a desirable location for other royals and nobles to be buried.

“That very year the king died in Normandy the next day after the feast of St Andrew. Then this land immediately grew dark because every man who could immediately robbed another. Then his son and friends took and brought his body to England, and buried it at Reading.” - The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

1164 - Henry II attends official opening of Reading Abbey

Reading Abbey was officially opened in 1164 by Thomas becket on 19th April he was accompanied by ten bishops ceremony was attended by king henry II (grandson of hen I and his noble followers).

Relics were placed in the altar the archbishop processed around the church blessing it with holy water and the monks sang a mass and psalms.

Running the Royal Abbey

Medieval kings weren't based in London but moved from place to place with their courtiers and servants. Reading abbeys position on important roads which linked to the south West made it a natural venue for important events something like a major conference centre crossed with royal palace.

The abbey was such a large and ornate construction that building continued for almost 200 years after the foundation in 1121. By this time the older parts of the abbey would have been in need of repair. One of the most important additions was the Lady chapel dedicated to the virgin Mary on the east end of the church (1314).

The monks worshipped several times a day, but there was more to abbey life than church services, the monks also hosted pilgrims royal and noble visitors, studied religious texts, provided housing and medical care for local people and took care of Abbey property.

“Monks of the Cluniac order*, who are at this day a noble pattern of holiness, and an example of unwearied and delightful hospitality”. - William Malmesbury, 12th Century Chronicler

Abbey Hierarchy

Like in a business there is a hierarchy in an abbey. Someone needs to be in charge of making sure that everyone is doing their job and that all things like up-keep, welcoming guests and maintaining gardens are running to schedule.

Below are some of the jobs in the abbey from highest importance to the lowest:

- **Abbot** - In Charge of the Abbey
- **Prior** - Abbot's 2nd in command

- **Precentor** - in charge of the library, archives singing and processions
- **Sacrist** - Responsible for the security and upkeep of the church
- **Cellarer** - Managed the Abbey's estates and ensured the Abbey was well supplied with drink and firewood
- **Kitchener** - organised meals for the monks and the infirmary
- **Chamberlain** - Ensured the monks had clothes, shoes, and clean bedding and organised baths and shaving
- **Master of the infirmary** - looked after sick monks staying in the infirmary
- **Almoner**- Responsible for giving money, food and clothes to poor people living nearby
- **Master of the Novices** - in charge of training and educating new monks.
- **Then lastly - Novices** - Monks in training
- Some monks had no special duties but assisted the senior officials in their work
- **Abbey servants** - lived on site working in kitchens, gardens, stores and maintaining the buildings.

Monks would remain single for the rest of their lives and had to follow all of the rules of the Abbey including attending eight services a day in the abbey church. The monks also spent time saying prayers for the dead. Some must have done nothing but, worship, pray, sleep and eat.

Daily life in the Abbey

The monk's day varied from summer to winter. Below is a typical timetable for a summer day. In winter monks got up later and went to bed earlier.

- 2am Nocturns (night prayers)
- Dawn Lauds ("praise")
(wash and change/reading)
- 6am Prime (first hour prayers - 6am was counted as the first hour of the day)
- Work
- 9am Terce(Third hour prayers)
- Senior monks meet in the chapter house (work)
- 12 noon Sext (sixth hour prayers)
- Dinner
- 3pm None (ninth hour prayers)
- Work, supper
- Dusk Vespers (Evening Prayer)
- Reading
- 8pm Compline (prayers that complete the day)
- Sleep

Music was central to life at the abbey. All the daily services included singing of psalms and hymns.

The first monks at Reading Abbey came from the Cluniac order in France and Lewes priory which was linked to Cluny. All monks from Cluny and its priories followed the rules of the Cluniac order. By the 1220s Reading was seen as a part of the larger Benedictine order, founded by St Benedict in Italy c.AD530 with no strong links to Cluny.

Medieval Pilgrimage

The abbey was an important destination for Medieval pilgrims they came to ask for blessings, give thanks or ask for a cure may were drawn by one of the abbeys most famous relics - the hand of St James.

1185 - Embassy from Jerusalem

Heraclius Patriarch of Jerusalem visited England and stayed at the abbey, at a meeting with Henry II he promised Henry will be made king of Jerusalem if he will lead a crusade to protect Jerusalem from an attack by a Muslim army (Henry said no!)

1200 - Summer is Icumen in is one of the oldest secular (non-religious) songs in English and the first ever to be known with six lines of melody. It is thought to have been written at the Abbey in 1200s in Middle English.

1254 - Reading receives a Royal Charter from Henry III.

1314 - Lady Chapel built.

1359 - Royal wedding John of Gaunt (son of Edward III) married Blanche of Lancaster (daughter of the powerful Duke of Lancaster).

1400 - The wharf was made by setting strong oak posts along the river bank and slotting posts in behind.

1453 - Reading Abbey used for meetings of parliament during plague outbreaks London.

1470 - The old abbey guesthouse begins to be used as a boy's school the upper rooms were Reading's Town Hall and Courthouse until the 18th Century.

1536 - Closure of monasteries order in 1536.

1537 - In 1537 over 400 years of monastic time at reading abbey suddenly came to an end. On the orders of Henry VIII the abbey was closed. Henry took the abbey's valuable possessions the monks had to leave their home the Abbott was executed.

1539 - Henry VIII closes Reading Abbey, Abbot Hugh Faringdon is executed.

"The King is not supreme head of the church of England. And I trust to see the pope bear as greater rule as he ever did in England shortly. And I will say masses for him every week". - Hugh Faringdon, 1539

1539 - A gallows was set up near the west door of the abbey church. Readings last Abbott Hugh Cook of Farringdon was tied to a hurdle harnessed to a horse and paraded through the streets of Reading to the gallows. He was executed alongside two monks: John Eynon (Priest of St Giles) and John Rugg. Hugh had been convicted of treason his punishment was hanging drawing and quartering. After Hugh's execution the abbey was closed down the monks left to find work and all the church's precious gold silver and art were shipped to London to be added to the King's treasury.

When the abbey closed in 1539, the town was changed. Trade was lost and people in St Laurence parish lost their burial ground.

In the longer-term merchants could trade more freely with the main trades of leather and clothmaking remaining. A new graveyard was created, and the town was given new rights and a new town hall and stone from the abbey gave reading a useful source of building materials for years to come.

1542 - The Church of Greyfriars (closed by Henry VIII) was given to the town council as a meeting place.

1547 - Henry VIII died, and Edward was too young to become King, so the Duke of Somerset ruled as Lord Protector. On Somerset's orders the abbot's lodgings were turned into a Royal Palace but lead from the roofs of other Abbey buildings was stripped off and sold. Good quality stone was taken away and reused in Reading and beyond. The flint cores of the church walls were left standing.

With the church now derelict, tombs were vandalised, and the bones of Royal bodies buried were probably scattered.

1550 - Some of the stone from the Abbey was used to rebuild the tower of Reading Minster.

1557 - A replacement graveyard was created by St Laurence's church (Queen Mary also grants pensions to former monks).

1560 - Elizabeth I granted a new town charter - new rights and a new town hall were included.

1578 - The town council moved to the old Hospitium and Greyfriars was turned into a Poorhouse.

1600 - Reading in the 17th century was a hard and uncertain place. Bubonic plague was rife, trade slowed down and many workers laid off in various companies throughout Reading.

1628 - The oracle poorhouse was opened - a poor house for unemployed weavers funded by John Kendrick.

1642 - Civil war broke out between Parliamentarians and Royalists. Thousands of soldiers fought for control of the town. Soldiers arrived in reading and used the ruined walls of the church to create fortifications overlooking the town and river.

1643 - The Abbey church was severely damaged in the Civil War. Reading was captured by Parliament and then taken again by the Royalists.

1644 - The Ruins were demolished on the orders of King Charles I so the abbey could not be used for military purposes again. The east end of the church was finally destroyed with a massive charge of gun powder.

1649 - Parliament had the upper hand and condemned Charles I to death. Reading MP Robert Blagrave was one of 59 judges to sign the death warrant.

1670 - Despite the damage to the church dormitory and palace, the stables survived and were still being used in the 1670s.

1688 - Prince William of orange led a glorious revolution against rule of James II and became King William III.

1700 - The Abbey gateway became a girls' school that Jane Austen attended.

1780 - A Gaol was built over the east end of the abbey grounds. During the works it was reported that a vault was discovered" ...in the vault was a leaden coffin almost devoured by time. A perfect skeleton was contained therein, which undoubtedly was the kings...The bones were divided among the spectator, but the coffin was sold to a plumber." - The 'Gentleman's magazine'

Sutton's seeds:

In the 1840s Martin Sutton turned his Father's corn trading business into a household name by realising he could post catalogues to customer and deliver seeds by rail. Sutton's seeds established itself as one of the world's first mail order catalogues. Seeds were shipped around the world including to the Taj Mahal.

Simmonds Beer:

Reading was a good place to make beer because malted barley and hops we produced locally in large crops. The most famous brewery was H & G Simonds founded in 1785.

The brewery installed a steam engine in 1799. Simonds supplied the military college in Sandhurst. Their beer became the army's favourite and was taken to the Crimea and Boer Wars. They also supplied Great Western Railway.

Huntley & Palmers:

1812-35 - A two room school house stood within the Abbey ruins

1822 - J. Huntley and Son biscuit bakery opens in London Street

1922 - Huntley & Palmers supplies Captain Scott's Antarctic Expedition

- 1914-18- Made army biscuits and artillery shell cases during World War I
- 1975 - The factory was used as location for Bugsy Malone
- 1976 - Biscuit production ends at Reading
- 1996 - Head office moves from reading to Liverpool.

The Railway and Reading

In 1835 construction of the Great western Railway began. The railways transformed Readings fortunes they made it possible to shift large quantities of manufactured goods quickly and cheaply. Sutton's seeds, Huntley & Palmers and Simonds all embraced this opportunity and within a generation were trading all over the world.

1833 - People of Reading fundraise to buy Abbey Ruins.

1840 - St James Church a new roman catholic church opened in the former Abbey grounds. It was funded by a local catholic called James Wheble. The design, by Augustus Welby Pugin, echoes the Romanesque style of the 1120swhen building at Reading Abbey first began.

1844 - Gaol rebuilt to a design by Sir Gilbert Scott and William Moffat.

1850 - The outer court which had been used for markets and grazing animals was instead laid out as a town park.

1861 - Abbey Gateway is restored by George Gilbert Scott.

1873 - Suttons Seeds builds new Reading Headquarters.

<https://www.suttons.co.uk/About-UsHistory.htm>

1920 - Reading Pageant in the Abbey Ruins.

1980 - An archaeological dig uncovered a medieval wharf on the banks of the river Kennet (model) the wharf is where the stone was delivered to build the abbey, where Henry I's body was brought ashore for burial and where firewood, food and wine were landed to supply the abbey.

2018 - The Abbey Ruins reopen after major conservation works.

Other information:

Reusing materials:

- Abbey Stones have been reused all around reading. Some can even be seen lying in the streets. Some of them were taken even further afield.
- Some of the stone was used to rebuild the tower of Reading minster in the 1550s
- More stones were reused in the building of the knight's lodgings at Windsor Castle

- Wooden Panelling in the dining hall at Magdalen College in Oxford may have come from the Abbey's refectory

Monarchy

Tudors who ruled England throughout the History of Reading Abbey

Henry VIII - ordered closure of Abbey

Edward VI - His uncle, acting as his regent, broke up the Abbey buildings and sold the stones and lead as the country was becoming more protestant.

Mary Tudor - Gives land to create a graveyard at St Lawrence's church for reading towns people and grants pensions to former monks (returned to RC Church)

Elizabeth I - frequently stays in the old abbot's lodgings which had been turned into a royal palace. (Rejected pope and created an independent C of E)