

## **CDA-2-Reading-Abbey**

### **Reading Abbey: Connecting Archaeology, Heritage Management and Placemaking**

How to apply and further details: <https://www.sww-ahdtp.ac.uk/prospective-students/apply/collaborative-doctoral-award-projects-2021/>

#### **Supervisors**

- Prof Roberta Gilchrist (University of Reading, [r.l.gilchrist@reading.ac.uk](mailto:r.l.gilchrist@reading.ac.uk))
- Dr Fraser Sturt (University of Southampton, [f.sturt@soton.ac.uk](mailto:f.sturt@soton.ac.uk))
- Matthew Williams (Reading Museum [RM], [matthew.williams@reading.gov.uk](mailto:matthew.williams@reading.gov.uk)) with Fiona MacDonald (Berkshire Archaeology [BA], [fiona.macdonald@reading.gov.uk](mailto:fiona.macdonald@reading.gov.uk))

The supervisory team comprises Gilchrist (Reading) and Sturt (Southampton), with non-HEI co-supervisors Williams (Manager of RM) and Macdonald (Principal Archaeologist, BA). The academic co-supervisors bring complementary expertise in monastic archaeology/ placemaking (Gilchrist) and deposit-mapping/ digital visualisation (Sturt). Gilchrist has supervised 13 PhDs to successful completion, including an AHRC CDA, and has extensive experience of collaborative research with non-HEIs (Glastonbury Abbey, British Museum, MoLA). Sturt has supervised 13 PhDs to successful completion and co-directed a Leverhulme DTC. The non-HEI co-supervisors connect the project to practical heritage management in Reading, providing opportunities to engage with statutory planning processes and placemaking in the Abbey Quarter. Williams and Macdonald have previous experience of managing projects, internships and studentships.

#### **Subject**

This project connects the medieval archaeology of Reading Abbey (RA) with current heritage needs and opportunities in the town of Reading. It offers a unique platform for a doctoral student to make an original contribution to archaeological understanding of this site of national historical significance; to develop innovative approaches to 4D digital data modelling and visualisation; and to use the research to inform local conservation policy and community engagement with heritage.

#### **Research questions**

The key research questions are:

- What are the full range of archaeological sources for RA and how reliable are they?
- How can these sources be used to chart the development of the precinct over time?
- How did RA evolve in comparison with other urban Benedictine monasteries?
- What is the most effective method for developing a digital subsurface model to map the extent of evidence?

- Can areas of the precinct be characterised according to their archaeological value (e.g. sensitivity to new development, research potential, degrees of previous disturbance), in order to create a tool for future heritage management?
- What approaches to data visualisation can be harnessed to integrate all sources of 4D data (including surviving and documented architectural remains)?
- How can the resulting 4D visualisation models of RA be used to enrich public engagement and local placemaking initiatives?

The doctoral student will work closely with supervisors at Reading Museum and Berkshire Archaeology (both part of Reading Borough Council) to interrogate primary archaeological sources and to connect the research with local heritage management needs. Supervisors at Reading and Southampton Universities will support interpretation of sources and integration and visualisation of data, to enhance academic understanding of RA's historical significance and to digitally model deposits to appreciate extent, value and threat for future heritage management by RBC.

A 6-month placement based at RM/BA is planned (Year 2) to enhance the public databases and to develop a deposit model. The placement will directly address the research questions and outcomes of the doctoral project, while also improving the quality and consistency of public records to inform future planning and heritage management decisions.

The research process will prioritise spatial questions and place the medieval abbey in long-term perspective. The wider monastic landscape and its distinctive character will be evaluated against Benedictine monasteries of comparable status (e.g. Glastonbury, York, Bury St Edmunds). The digital modelling will bring together data within a 4D geographical information systems (GIS) package, in contrast with traditional approaches where architectural remains and subsurface archaeological deposits are treated separately.

The student will have the opportunity to select a special theme or case study appropriate to their own research interests. They might choose to focus on a particular area of the precinct (e.g. the functioning of the inner and outer courts for charity and industry); or to highlight a specific chronological phase (such as the post-medieval royal palace and Civil War fortification); or to experiment with additional methods of digital modelling or visualisation.

New academic understanding of the physical character, distinctiveness and historical development of RA will directly inform heritage-based placemaking that is central to RBC's economic regeneration and tourism development. The studentship will complement and support Reading's HAZ Project, funded until 2024.

## **Research context**

Reading Abbey was founded by Henry I in 1121 to serve as a place of royal ceremony and ultimately as his mausoleum. The abbey stimulated Reading's urban development and was among England's ten richest Benedictine monasteries. Despite its national significance, however, RA's archaeology has not been systematically studied. Substantial ruins survive of the south transept, the east cloister range and the gatehouse, while the buried remains of the precinct cover a large part of the modern town centre (the Abbey Quarter). RA was

subject to antiquarian investigation from the 18th century onwards and numerous small-scale archaeological interventions were conducted from the 1960s to the 1990s. Its surviving medieval documents and Romanesque sculpture have been examined, but there has been no systematic evaluation, mapping, or synthesis of archaeological sources.

The limited archaeological understanding of RA is now a pressing concern, both in relation to urban regeneration strategies, and in response to the growing public appetite for cultural heritage. For many years the abbey was inaccessible due to the dangerous state of the ruins; it re-opened to the public in 2018, after a major conservation project. RA is now at the heart of Reading Borough Council's (RBC) plans for urban regeneration, as the beacon for RBC's strategic programme of 'placemaking', a collaborative process which aims to revive public spaces by taking account of cultural identity and heritage in designs for their use. The eastern part of RA's precinct falls within Reading Prison, currently being sold by the Ministry of Justice for redevelopment (to an unknown buyer). The sale has heightened public awareness of the heritage value of RA and the vulnerability of its archaeology.

The research will address the urgent need for improved knowledge of RA's archaeology, both to enhance historical understanding and to meet the demands of urban regeneration. Planning decisions in the Abbey Quarter require a more robust assessment and modelling of the physical survival of archaeological deposits and their academic significance, to guide appropriate mitigation. This new archaeological knowledge will also inform Reading's placemaking initiatives, providing outstanding opportunities for public dissemination.

### **Main resources/collections in this area**

RM's collection database has over 1000 records for RA, ranging from antiquarian observations to site archives (finds and data) from 20 formal interventions, including non-destructive surveys and excavations. BA maintains the Historic Environment Record (HER) which includes digital/GIS and 'legacy' (paper) records. Antiquarian maps and surveys date from the 18th century onwards. A recently completed digital base plan will facilitate digital mapping of the evidence using ArcGIS.

### **Skills developed by student and employability enhancement**

Through collaborative research and a placement opportunity, the student will gain skills in the critical interpretation of sources, data interoperability, digital mapping, community engagement and local government heritage management. This will enhance their employability in multiple sectors: academic, heritage, museums, digital, commercial archaeology, conservation and planning.

RM/BA will provide access to training, facilities and expertise in museum archives/public engagement and HER/heritage management, including supervising a 6-month placement and a workshop on heritage and placemaking at RA. The research student will be supported to develop their own imaginative approaches to public engagement through involvement in the HAZ as part of RM's sector-leading digital audience engagement (e.g. blogs, social media, online exhibitions, newsletters and public talks/tours).

Through a placement with the BA team, the student will gain skills in the management and enhancement of HERs (including industry-standard specialist software), use of HER data and primary sources in development management decision-making, and archaeological conservation in the planning system.

Working with RM's interdisciplinary team, the student will garner skills in sharing heritage with diverse audiences (collections, education, exhibitions, marketing). They will gain experience of community engagement around placemaking through a project funded by Historic England and RBC: 'Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone' (HAZ). RM's expertise is reflected in their award for 'Best Use of Heritage in Placemaking' at the Planning Awards 2020.