The Norman history of Reading

Reading was first settled in the sixth century AD by Saxons and in AD 870 Viking raiders set up an over-winter base at Reading, strategically located between the River Thames and River Kennet - the earliest-known documentary reference to Reading.

In 1121, 55 years after the Battle of Hastings (a full-size Victorian version of the tapestry depicting the battle can be viewed in its own dedicated gallery in Reading Museum), King Henry I, William the Conqueror's youngest son, announced plans to build a mighty royal abbey in Reading. Henry had become King following the death of his father and that of his older brother William II in a hunting accident. He successfully fought his other older brother Robert to become Duke of Normandy in 1106.



Henry chose a site on high ground between the River Kennet and River Thames. A small branch of the River Kennet, known as the Holy Brook, powered the abbey's watermill (you can still see the mill arch today). King Henry I died in France before his Abbey was complete but his body was returned to England and he was buried in front of the high altar of Reading Abbey in 1136. Later, the Abbey church was consecrated by Archbishop Thomas Becket in the presence of Henry II, Henry's grandson. Building work was still going on when the Abbey church was officially opened on 19 April 1164.



Throughout medieval times, Reading was the site of a great royal Abbey – a religious community centred round a magnificent church - one of the largest monasteries in Europe. The Abbey would have been a large and impressive church with living quarters for dozens of monks, who would worship in the church. No expense was spared in its construction.

The Abbey was the fourth largest Romanesque church in Britain. It was such a large and ornate construction that building continued for almost 200 years after the original foundation in 1121.



Monks lived, worked and worshipped here for more than 400 years. Royal funerals and weddings and meetings of court and Parliament were held at the Abbey. Thousands of pilgrims visited to pray for a blessing or a cure. It was a site of international significance.

The Abbey owned the town of Reading and the Abbot was its lord. The Abbey developed the town laying out new streets and properties including present-day Broad Street, Friar Street, London Street and Market Place in the town centre.

You can find out more about the Abbey in the story of Reading gallery in Reading Museum. The Abbey Ruins are open every day to explore. There are also guided tours every Saturday.