

# RM

READING  
MUSEUM

# ABBEY QUARTER OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

Wandering through the Abbey Quarter in Reading you will frequently come across artworks and sculptures. You may have already found the Abbey Quarter Outdoor Art Discovery Map, if not you can download one from the Museum website or pick one up when you visit the Museum.

In this document you will find some interesting details about the artworks that are noted on the map.



# OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

## 1 KING EDWARD VII

by George Edward Wade, 1902. Bronze

Edward VII was a hugely popular king although he only reigned from 1902 to 1910. Before 1902 he was better known as Bertie, Prince of Wales, a notorious playboy and gambler. He was at the heart of a fashionable set of glamorous socialites whose exploits filled the newspapers of the day. Here he is shown in his magnificent and theatrical coronation robes. Over life size and set high above the street, the sculpture is naturalistic with the texture of materials such as his leather boots brilliantly depicted. It is a copy of a sculpture made for Madras (Chennai) by a sculptor who knew the prince well and certainly modelled the head from life. The sculpture was given to Reading by Martin John Sutton, head of Sutton's Seeds.



# OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

## 2 TOWN HALL FRIEZES: DEPICTING ANCIENT BRITON LIFE, ROMAN LIFE, LITERATURE, SCIENCE

by William Charles May 1896 and  
Reading Abbey, Charles Pinker,  
1883. Terracotta.

The art gallery and reading room were the final part of the Town Hall complex to be built in 1896, joining the Museum, Library and the School of Art & Science. The subject matter of the frieze refers to what was going on in the completed building. They are complicated allegorical images about history, literature and science which were always difficult to read so high-up on the building.

The isolated panel to the right is part of the 1883 Museum and Library, and was originally designed to be one of a set running along the façade showing events in the life of Reading Abbey. However, only the panel of the Abbey's foundation stone being laid was completed.



# OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

## 3 QUEEN VICTORIA

carved by George Simonds, 1887.

**Marble**

Queen Victoria is elevated above the pedestrians in the Town Hall Square as the then Empress of the British Empire. However, while the Queen may be dressed in ceremonial robes she is not idealised. The sculpture is a highly naturalistic, even affectionate and the Queen is portrayed as chubby and slightly grumpy. You can imagine her as the disapproving mother of Edward VII (number 1 on the map). Interestingly the work was approved by the Queen.

The sculpture is made of Italian marble and is more delicate than you might think. Much of the decorative surface and crisply carved edges have been worn away by pollution and cleaning, for example the Queen's dress was originally covered in flowers. In Reading Museum, you can see the finger blasted from the statue by an air raid in 1943.



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## 4 FORBURY STANDING STONE

designed by Sally Castle, carved by  
Matt Doyle, 2003. Limestone

This simple standing stone is covered with text about the mystical number four and gardens. Many ancient gardens were laid out in a cross shape with four sections. The images refer to decorated tiles made for Reading Abbey.

The stone stands in Forbury Square once the site of the gardens of Reading Abbey and until 1962 the Sutton's Seeds establishment, an important industry in nineteenth and twentieth century Reading. It was commissioned as part of the redevelopment of the site in 2003 from Sally Castle who is a local artist specialising in calligraphy.



## 5 TROOPER POTT'S MEMORIAL

by Tom Murphy, 2015.  
Bronze



This memorial depicts Trooper Frederick Potts dragging his badly wounded colleague Arthur Andrews to safety on an entrenching shovel while under fire at Scimitar Hill in Gallipoli during the First World War. For this act Potts was awarded the Victoria Cross. The heroic scale, theatrical poses and addition of realistic battlefield objects make this a snapshot in his story. The low plinth is effectively a stage, and we are the audience.

The commission is also a memorial to the 426 men of The Berkshire Yeomanry who lost their lives in service to their country in the twentieth century with the addition of a Roll of Honour. The Potts Trust's aim to educate people today is apparent with the inclusion of interpretation boards and a comprehensive website at

[www.pottsvctrust.org](http://www.pottsvctrust.org)

## 6 ABBEY GATEWAY CARVINGS

**Heads by Andrew Ohlson 1900. Head of Hugh Faringdon by Alex Wenham, 2021. Limestone**

The gateway was rebuilt after collapse in 1861 and amongst the original stones reused are two griffins. Later it was decorated with the heads of figures connected with Abbey's story. These include King Henry I and Queen Matilda, a Knights Templar, a pilgrim, an Abbot, a Benedictine monk, a Benedictine nun, a town Burgess and his wife, as well as Jesus, the Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist to whom the Abbey was dedicated.

To mark the Abbey's 900th anniversary a new head was added, the subject, Hugh Faringdon the last Abbot of Reading Abbey, was chosen by the public.

The pupils of his eyes were carved in as dark shadows, distinguishing them from blank eyes of the older heads.



# OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

## 7 **ROBED FIGURE**

by Elizabeth Frink,  
1985-86. Bronze

This sculpture was acquired by the office developers in the late 1980s and was originally sited where the Sørensen sculpture is today (number 8 on the map). The figure was originally designed as the Executioner in Frink's most famous group sculpture, *The Dorset Martyrs*. It is one of an edition of four. Frink's sculpture is always ambiguous and here rather than looking at an individual, are we viewing a personification of judgement or death?

It seems appropriate for the site, standing not far from the place where the Abbey's last abbot Hugh Faringdon was executed and where the monks daily contemplated life and death in the cloisters. Cowled and robed the figure is intimidating but also somehow vulnerable and sad. The pose is forceful but clumsy, and the body is deliberately undefined. The surface has been left rough to show scrim bandaging and chisel marks from its making.





# OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

## 8 UNTITLED SCULPTURE

by Jens-Flemming Sørensen, 2000.  
Bronze

This sculpture seems fitting for its Abbey Ruins setting but was not made in response to the site. It was acquired ready-made by the developers of Abbey Gardens offices. The Danish artist's work is surreal, with open egg-like spheres and slightly futuristic structures mixed up with naturalistic faces. While most of the sculpture sits on a stone plinth the loose sphere on the grass nearby brings the unnerving, slightly dystopian scene into the viewers own space.



# OUTDOOR ART HIGHLIGHTS

## 9 CREATE ESCAPE

by Banksy, 2021.  
Paint

Created using stencils and hand finished, it appeared over-night. It has Banksy's trademark wit and is a commentary on contemporary events and issues. Banksy produced a striking image of a prisoner-writer escaping over the prison wall with the help of a rope made of a document weighed down with a typewriter. It is probably a reference to Oscar Wilde, the most famous writer to have been imprisoned at the Gaol between 1895 and 1897. Since the Prison closed in 2013, *Inside: Artists and Writers* has been staged at the Gaol, and an active campaign for the Gaol to become an arts centre is supported by Banksy.



## 10 THE SPACE BETWEEN

by Simon Hitchens, 2015. Granite

Commissioned specifically to mark the pedestrian entrance to the commercial building, Forbury Place, the 2.6 metre sculpture was designed to complement the structures and surfaces in the buildings behind it. Each of the two parts started off as a piece of Chinese granite weighing 30 tons, which were then carved into a simple helical form. They were positioned very carefully so that as you walk past or around them, the forms seem to move towards and then away from each other. You become aware of the space between the forms as a fluid thing and a vital part of the sculpture.



## 11 THE MAIWAND LION

by **George Simonds, 1886. Cast Iron**

The memorial is to the 11 officers and 317 men of the Royal Berkshire Regiment who died at the Battle of Maiwand, 27 July 1880, during the Second Afghan War.

The lion on top of this memorial measures 9.48 metres from nose to tail-tip. This scale of sculpture is called 'heroic size'. As lions were traditionally considered noble beasts and symbols of the British Empire it was seen as appropriate choice at the time.

Simonds studied lions at a zoo and experimented with small models before making a life size plaster model. He then made a plaster cast of the model, sawed the cast into nine pieces, enlarged each piece to full size, and then cast the huge pieces in iron. When the iron pieces were put together most of the seams were smoothed over, but are still clearly visible on one leg.

Simonds was an innovator and his choice of cast iron to make the sculpture was remarkable. Cast iron, an important industrial material in the Victorian era, was rarely used for sculpture, let alone at this scale.



## 12 'REQUIEM' SPANISH CIVIL WAR MEMORIAL

by Eric Stanford, 1990.  
Portland stone



A memorial for the Reading Volunteers to the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War 1936 – 39. It is principally dedicated to three Reading men, George Middleton, William Ball and Archibald Francis, who lost their lives for the Republican cause.

It was commissioned by the Reading International Brigade Memorial Committee and was originally sited outside the old Civic Centre. The style of the four-sided sculpture reflects both Eric Stanford's work and the International Modernist Art of the 1930s.

The front image represents Spain grieving for the infant Republic, the back the three Reading men. There are Inscriptions on all sides including 'Defended Democracy', 'Volunteers for Peace', and the names of the men with the date and place of their deaths.

## 13 READING ABBEY STONES IN THE ARCH AT ENTRANCE TO THE ABBEY RUINS

by unknown medieval stonemasons.  
**Limestone**

This is just a glimpse of some of the many stones with carved patterns such as zigzags or interlacing foliage that decorated the medieval Abbey. The Abbey buildings were systematically destroyed when it was closed in 1539. The limestone that faced the walls was removed and used in building projects including places on the Thames like Windsor Castle.

There are more examples of pieces of decorated stone close by in the Abbey Ruins. In Reading Museum you can find examples of the remarkable twelfth century carved capitals from the Abbey with their complicated designs of creatures and foliage.

