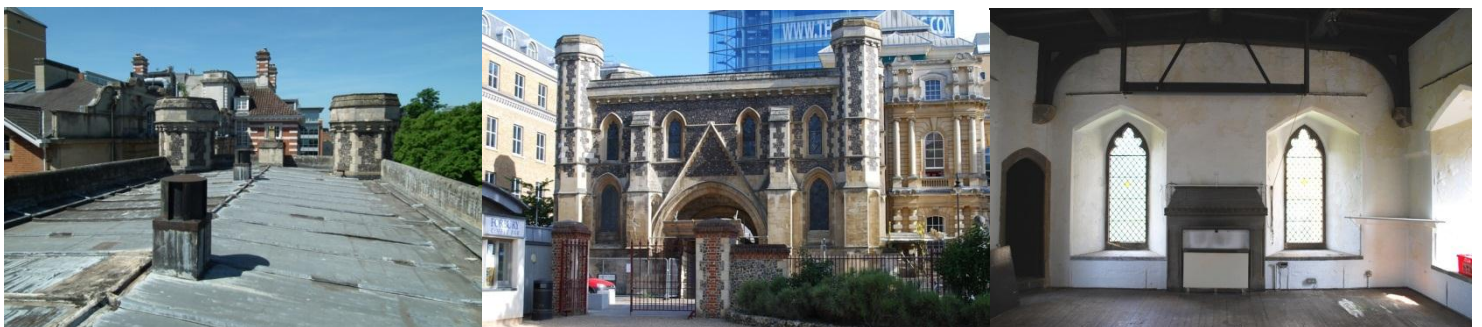




## **Reading Abbey Revealed: The Abbey Gate – Heritage Statement**

**The Forbury, Reading  
September 2015**

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Prepared by:

Historic Buildings Team, HCC Property Services,  
Three Minsters House, 76 High Street, Winchester, SO23 8UL

On behalf of:

Reading Borough Council  
Civic Offices, Bridge Street, Reading RG1 2LU

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## 1.0 Assessment of Heritage Significance

### 1.1 Description

**Listing:** 1155691 READING ABBEY GATE

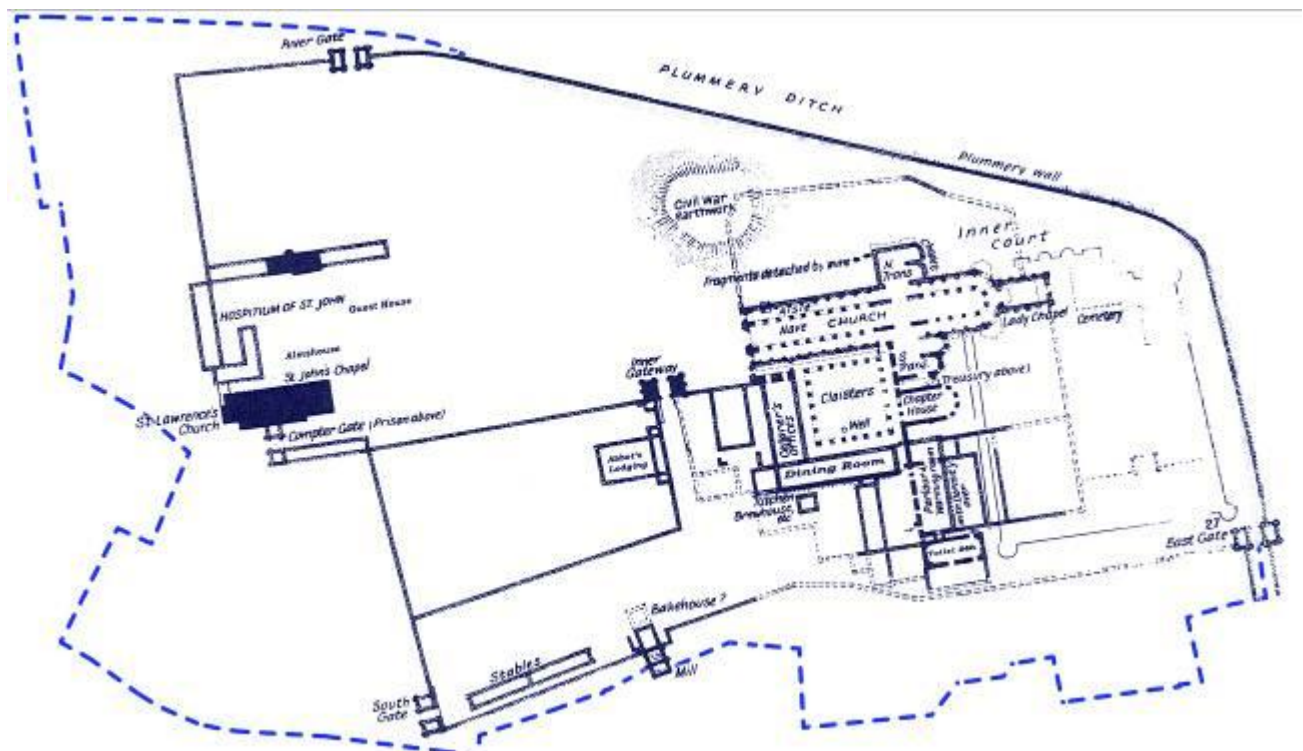
**Grade:** I

**Date first listed:** 22-Mar-1957

C12 to C14. Entirely remodelled by Sir George Gilbert Scott 1861. Flint and Bath stone ashlar, quoins etc. to ground floor. 2 storeys with shaped modillion cornice, parapet with weathered coping, Central pointed archway with roll mould and gabled drip over. Flanking buttresses. 4 lancets on 1st floor with foiled heads, 2 on ground floor with impost and cill strings. Octagonal end turrets with cornice, parapet and cope. Turrets and buttresses chamfered below squinches of 1st floor; headstops in squinches. Inside the archway is a large round headed arch with a double flat roll. Entrance passage intended to be vaulted, 2 pointed doorways and stairs to left. Rear much the same except for round headed entrance.

**Scheduled Monument:** 1007932 Reading Abbey: a Cluniac and Benedictine monastery and Civil War earthwork, Reading

Much of the area of the Abbey precinct, including both standing and buried remains, is scheduled. The monument description also recognises the importance of the later English Civil War earthwork defences. The area of scheduling was revised in 1993 to cover a wider area than just the standing remains. It is described by English Heritage as 'an excellent example of a medieval monastic complex, one of few such sites in Berkshire. The ruined abbey buildings survive well, standing almost to their original height. The complete Abbey site is well documented, both historically and archaeologically, and there is still considerable potential for the survival of archaeological material within its confines.'



1: Plan of Reading Abbey drawn by Jamieson Hurry in 1896

## 1.2 Context

The Inner Abbey Gate is the only complete, albeit heavily restored, building to have survived from the monastic buildings at the east end of the Forbury. The whole site, now identified as the Abbey Quarter, is located in the centre of Reading on the eastern side of the main shopping district and south east of Reading train station. It covers an area of 12.85 hectares. This has been the traditional civic and ceremonial heart of the county town of Royal Berkshire since the medieval period. The Abbey Quarter is defined by the medieval streets and rivers that outline the precinct of Reading Abbey. This area contained the substantial buildings and grounds of Reading Abbey over a period of just over 400 years from its foundation by Henry I in 1121 to its dissolution by Henry VIII in 1539. The Quarter is bounded by the Forbury Road to the north and east, the River Kennet and Holy Brook to the south and the historically significant Victorian Civic Buildings and Market Place to the west.



2. Map of the Abbey Quarter showing pedestrian routes. The Gate is highlighted in yellow

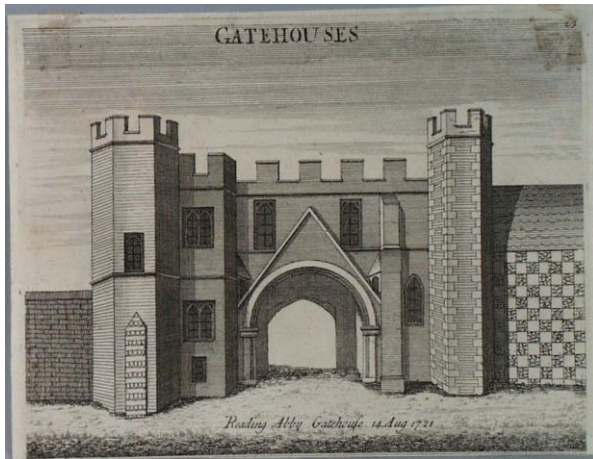
### 1.3 Historic Development

The first recorded activity on this site is the founding of the Abbey by King Henry I, the youngest son of King William 'the Conqueror', both as a memorial to his only legitimate son and as his own burial place. It was founded as a Benedictine house on the Cluniac model. Its convenient location in the centre of southern England, with easy access by road and river, and its close proximity to London, made it a favourite stopping place for kings. As a royal foundation it received considerable patronage, making it among the ten wealthiest Benedictine houses in England. Its relics, including the hand of St James the Apostle, also made it a major centre of European pilgrimage. The Abbey was regularly the focus of national events bringing prestige and business to Reading. The town developed as a cloth-making centre and enjoyed the benefit of unrestricted trade at numerous annual fairs held by Royal grant in the Abbey's outer court – the Forbury.

The Abbey church was built over a period of 43 years between its foundation in 1121 and its consecration in 1164 and would have physically dominated the relatively primitive buildings of the adjacent town. The Inner Gate straddled the dividing line between the public side of the Abbey represented by the chapel ante portas – St Laurence's Church, the Hospitium, the open space of the Forbury and the Abbey church itself on the north side and the private monastery complex to the south.

The Inner Gate was enlarged and embellished during the thirteenth century when the original Norman round arch was enclosed by Early English pointed arches surmounted by steeply pitched head moulds. The distinguishing character of the Gate deriving from this time are the repeated squinch canopies either side of the buttresses which support octagonal turrets at the corners and simply batter back against the buttresses on either side of the archway. These framed a series of twenty four sculpted head stops of which remnants of eight of the medieval originals survive. There is no evidence that the flint work and corbelled parapet which feature in the Gilbert Scott restoration existed on the medieval original, in fact the earliest picture of the Gate shows it being crenellated and having an all ashlar stone frontage. Most of the original plain lancet windows were, over time, replaced with rectangular timber casement or sash windows until they were reinstated in the restoration. The stairs rise within the eastern wing and continue up to the

second floor following the line of a narrow band of barrel vaulting between the front and inner arches. This stair had clearly been concealed and was not known about until it was discovered during the initial opening up works in 1860 which preceded the restoration. At some point not long before or after the dissolution, a brick stair tower was built onto the south west corner of the Gate, similar in appearance to one which survives on the north side of the Hospitium. The substantial chamber above the gateway is believed to have been the venue for meetings between the Abbots and the burgesses representing the townspeople.



2. The earliest known engraving of the Gate dated 1721 showing the brick stair tower on the south side  
Reading Borough Council



3. Engraving dated 1759 of the north side of the Gate  
Blackmore  
Reading Borough Council

The occasionally fractious relationship between the Abbey and its subject town was formalised in an agreement in 1254 and a Royal Charter in 1487 which enabled both to coexist and prosper. During the latter part of this period some significant aspects of the life of the Abbey changed. The number of visiting pilgrims declined leading to the disuse of the Hospitium and, in the face of hard economic times, the Abbey's alms-houses, various chapels and bridges in the town were neglected and the Leper Hospital was closed down. The Abbey itself came to an abrupt end when it was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539. The Abbey buildings which were not used as a Royal Palace were largely dismantled for building materials during the 1550s and 1560s. The Inner Gate survived as part of this palace up to the Civil War in the 1640s. Together with other surviving Abbey buildings the Gate effectively fell into private ownership during the Commonwealth.

The development of the town during the eighteenth century densely packed the areas immediately to the south and west, while the site of the former Abbey remained a lightly built up residential suburb containing the ruins of the Abbey and the locally recognised amenity and vantage point of Forbury Hill. The Forbury (road) was the centre of a respectable neighbourhood, home to medical practitioners, artists and various educational establishments. One of these was a school based in the house adjacent to and incorporating at least part of the Inner Gate. The school had been founded in 1755 as the Reading Ladies Boarding School and is remembered because it was attended by Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra from 1785 to 1786. It continued until 1794 when it went bankrupt. Contemporary views and maps show an enclosed walled garden and a semi-circular green defined by a ditch projecting out over what is now Forbury Gardens separating the row of houses and their genteel inhabitants from the rougher open area of the Forbury.



4. Engraving of the north side of the Gate in 1769  
soon after it lost its battlements  
Paul Sandby Reading Borough Council

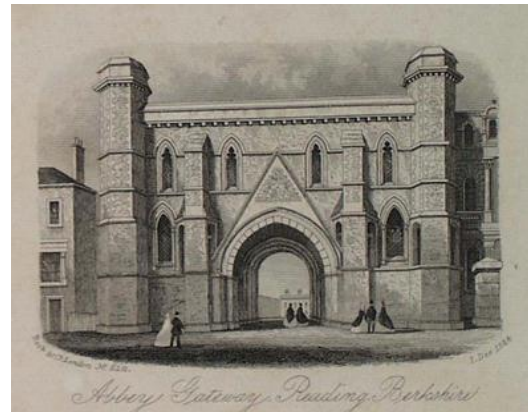


5. Painting of 1808 of the north side of the Gate looking west  
Paul Sandby Reading Borough Council

The ownership of the Abbey Gate (Inner Gate) was split either side of the archway but both parts were sold to the Corporation during the 1850s just in time for the collapse of the archway vault and its subsequent comprehensive reconstructive restoration by Gilbert Scott in 1861. His work is considered to be a faithful reconstruction of the exterior as it appeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, though the interior is unexceptional with few features and has been much adapted since. In 1859-61 the new county assize courts (now the Crown Court) were built immediately to the west of the gate facing the Forbury Gardens.



6. Partial collapse and dismantling in 1861  
Reading Borough Council



7. Engraving of the freshly restored Gate in 1864  
Reading Borough Council

After its restoration the Abbey Gate took on more of a community role. The corporation began letting it out to local groups and societies in order to make money back on their investment. In March 1862 the Rifle Volunteers (Reading Rifles) became the first tenants, using the hall above the Abbey Gate as a meeting hall. In 1867 it was converted into a community gymnasium offering facilities for recreation to encourage public fitness, however in 1885 it was decided that the free standing apparatus was unsatisfactory and the gymnasium was moved. The most significant group to have tenanted the Gate was the Berkshire Archaeological Society which began using it in 1889 and was in occupation until 1915. They used the gate rent free under the condition that they opened the gate to the public, created a collection of artefacts from the Abbey and offered guided tours of the Abbey ruins. During this time there was continuous maintenance and repair of the building. The society opened a museum on the ground floor of the Abbey Gate in 1902 displaying artefacts from the Abbey. In 1915 the Abbey ruins was designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

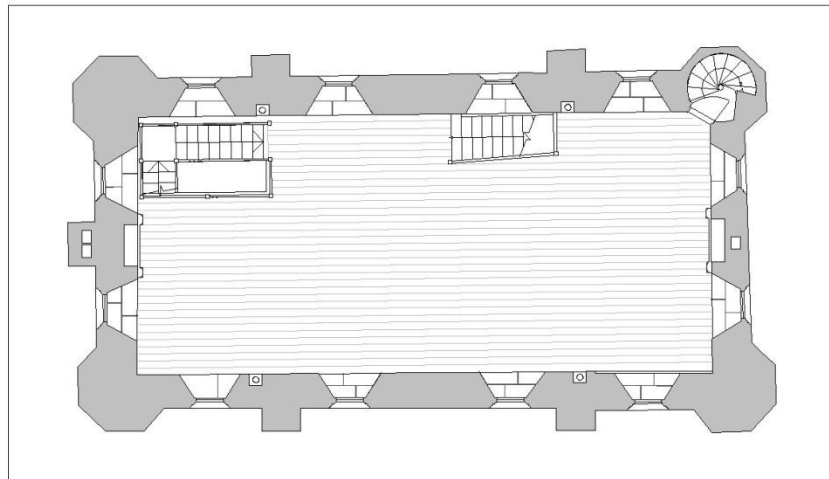
The Abbey Gate continued to be let to local societies until 1937 when it became an art gallery. The hall was refurbished and used to house display cases and exhibit the historical paintings depicting key events in the history of Reading Abbey commissioned by Dr. Hurry and presented by him to the Town. During the Second World War the Gate was used to show films promoting air raid precautions and the Reading Spotters Club (aeroplanes) used the hall as a headquarters. From 1942 to 1953 the west side rooms were leased to Thomas McLachlan, Public Analyst & Official Agricultural Chemist. This is the probable date of the infill of the south west doorway and the lead-lined sink.

After the war the Gate continued to be let out to local societies including the Reading rowing club, farmers club, naturalists club, camera club, radio society and university student association. In 1949 an internal steel fire escape ladder was installed in the west side of the gate. In 1957 the Abbey Gate was given a Grade I listed building status. The escape ladder was replaced by an internal stair linking with the external stone stairway under the archway in 1973 and in 1981 the first floor room on the east side was converted to provide a kitchen and toilets. Up until this time there had been an external toilet in the small yard on the south east corner of the Gate. External repairs were carried out in 1956-8 and in 1980. The road through the gate was finally closed to traffic in 1984, ten years after this was first suggested.

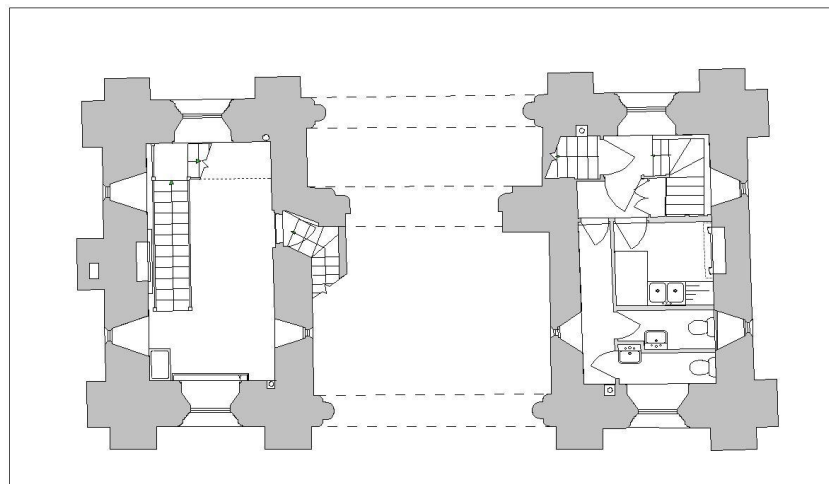
The final tenants of the Abbey Gate were the Reading All Steel Percussion Orchestra (RASPO) who used the Abbey Gate for rehearsals and performances. They were forced to leave the Abbey Gate after it was deemed to unsafe due to its on-going deterioration. In February 2010 the Abbey Gate was closed. After part of one of the high level corbels fell into the pedestrian walkway, protective fencing was erected around the gate and covered scaffolding walkways were constructed within the archway and over the access ramp to the Crown Court next door to protect the public from the risk of further stone loss. Since its closure the Abbey Gate has fallen into further disrepair as a result of water ingress.



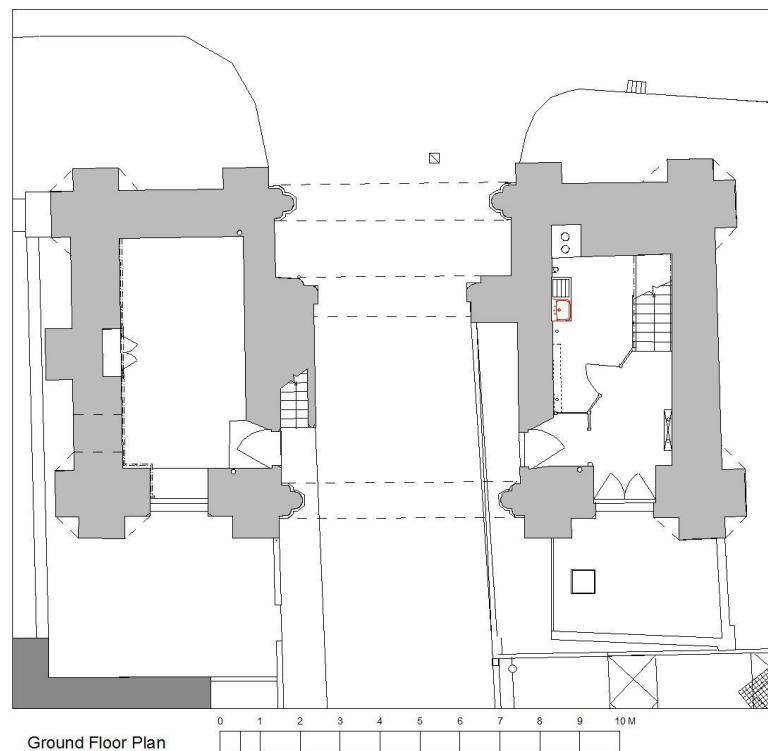
8. Photograph of the north side of the Gate in its current state with scaffolding fans, fencing and temporary roof in Place. This photograph and front cover HCC Property Services



Second Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



Ground Floor Plan

## 1.4 Heritage Significance

### Historical importance

The Abbey, of which the Inner Gate was an integral part, was one of northern Europe's most prestigious religious and political centres, and by the 14th century was one of the ten wealthiest monastic houses in England. It changed the shape of Reading, making it the most important town in the Thames Valley. Locally, its only rival in terms of importance was the abbey at Abingdon. Throughout its 400 year history as an abbey it was an important site for royal councils, weddings and burials.

### Archaeological significance

The Abbey site contains significant potential for archaeological discoveries and the re-examination of historic excavations many of which were poorly recorded. Little is known about the detailed physical development of the site between the foundation of the Abbey and its dissolution.

### Value through time

From being one of northern Europe's most prestigious religious and political centres the Abbey was reduced to being a source of building materials sold off to benefit the royal exchequer. The publicly perceived value of the site has gradually increased from the first recording of the ruins in the late eighteenth century, to early nineteenth century romantic descriptions in verse to public outcry at the threat of the demolition of the surviving ruins in 1831 and their purchase for the town by public subscription in 1833. The survival of the Inner Gate contributed to this revival and, as demonstrated by the great number of topographical pictures of it from the eighteenth century onwards, it became a significant symbol for Reading

### Preservation story

The story of the public acquisition and preservation of the Abbey site reflects universal changes in attitude towards historic remains in general and a more universal understanding of the value and importance of history. The site also illustrates the development of changing practices in building conservation. The partial re-building of the Inner Gate by Sir George Gilbert Scott is a good example of his Victorian gothic style which, in spite of appearances, preserved much of the medieval fabric within it.

## 2.0 Assessment of Impact

### 2.1 Background

The Abbey Gate has suffered stonework damage as a result of recent very cold winters. Apart from one string course corbel which fractured and dropped to the ground, it is the surface stone mortar repairs of the turret parapet copings and corbels which are failing and spalling off. The building has now been fenced off with temporary fencing and a scaffold crash deck installed to reduce the health and safety risk to members of the public who walk through the archway. This building is also currently included on the Historic England 'At Risk Register'.

In April and May 2006 the conservation architects Purcell Miller Tritton carried out a condition survey for Reading Borough Council. HCC Property Services re-visited the building in May and June 2011 and found that the findings of this survey were generally still valid but with some advancement of decay evident, particularly in connection with roof leaks. In March 2013 Historic England provided a grant for a more detailed condition survey. This was undertaken between May and July 2013 and included a detailed measured survey, a graphically and photographically recorded condition survey which included the use of a mobile elevated working platform to examine the upper areas of the exterior, opening up investigations with an associated archaeology watching brief, a CCTV drain survey, a specialist timber decay survey, analysis of mortar and plaster samples and additional ecological and asbestos surveys. The present condition is summarised below.

The lead roof covering is at the end of its serviceable life and numerous inappropriate repairs have been undertaken to patch the splits and tears in the surface. The length of the lead trays is excessive and stepped joints between gutter panels inadequate allowing water to back up from blocked outlets and spill into the building causing localised wet rot and plaster damage. Some sections of the internal cast iron rainwater downpipes, originally built into the walls, have been replaced with cast iron, asbestos cement or plastic sections however the remaining down pipes have generally corroded and fractured with the result that water is running down the outside of the pipe and is saturating the surrounding building fabric. In addition to the localised areas of wet rot in roof timbers, floor boards and plaster damage at second floor level significant damage to walls, floor joists and boards has occurred at first floor level at the south west down pipe position. Damage to structural timbers is currently superficial but will rapidly become significant unless the water penetration is stopped. Replacement of sections of sarking board, wall plate, and floor joists and boards at first floor level will be required to bring the building back into use.

Attempts to undertake a full CCTV survey from the down pipes on the west side of the archway to the storm water inspection chamber south east of the Gate were frustrated by the pipes being blocked by silt. Water jetting up from the inspection chamber produced quantities of gravel revealing that this branch pipe is completely fractured under the yard area attached to the Gate. Water which does percolate through the blocked pipes is therefore soaking away into the gravel bed adjacent to or under the building.

Given the urgent need to stop water getting into the building in order to stop further damage to the fabric Reading Borough Council installed a temporary scaffolding supporting a sheeting roof and downpipes. This is allowing the fabric to dry out thoroughly before permanent repairs can be undertaken.

The tenants vacated the building on account of its dilapidated condition and so it is currently empty. Unoccupied buildings, even if closely monitored, are always at a greater risk of accelerated decay and vandalism than occupied buildings.

A lack of long term use and secure future for the building has led to there being little investment over recent years to maintain the structure. The pressures on local government budget mean that less

funding has been available for repairs so a long term use with income generation will help provide the capital for a full programme of preventive maintenance.

## 2.2 Outline of Proposals

To identify options for long term sustainable use discussions have already begun with the Local Planning Authority and Historic England. Their pre-application planning advice has identified that office/business use would be the most acceptable of the potential alternative uses that have been identified once the Gate has been conserved.

The priorities for the Abbey Gate are as follows:

- Conservation of roof structure renewal of the lead roof, down pipes and underground drain runs to the local inspection chamber.
- Conservation of parapet and turret stonework.
- Conservation of particular damaged or eroded stones at lower levels
- Conservation and repairs to windows and external doors.

In addition to the building conservation work there is proposed

- Internal refurbishment and alterations to suit appropriate long term use of the building.
- Fit out of the ground level room on the west side of the archway as an education room with exhibition.

## 2.3 Impact of Proposals

The following covers the proposed alterations to the current use and layout of the Abbey Gate, it does not describe the extensive proposed conservation work and fabric repairs which will be subject to an application for Scheduled Ancient Monument consent.

1. First floor east side: removal of 1980s partitions and fittings to return this area to a single room. Line timber partition to staircase and fit out as a meeting room including an appropriately designed tea point with small sink.

|                                        |            |
|----------------------------------------|------------|
| Impact on historic fabric:             | Low        |
| Impact on setting of heritage asset:   | Low        |
| <b>Overall impact on significance:</b> | <b>Low</b> |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Extent of impact:            | Low                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Potential heritage benefits: | Accommodation on this floor reinstated to its original Victorian arrangement exploiting features such as lancet windows and a fireplace to full effect. Creating additional lettable floor area to increase rental income (ring-fenced for the maintenance of the Gate and the Ruins. |

2. Ground floor east side: removal of twentieth century kitchen fixtures. Installation of timber frame partitions and two toilets, water supply and drainage. Stub stack and below ground branch foul drain connection.

Impact on historic fabric: Medium

Impact on setting of heritage asset: Low

**Overall impact on significance: Low**

Extent of impact: Low

Potential heritage benefits: Replacement for removed first floor toilets within retained boarded partition of Victorian kitchen / pantry

3. First floor west side: removal of twentieth century secondary stair case and replacement with a more compact stair allowing half the first floor space to be partitioned off to create an additional useable office or meeting room.

Impact on historic fabric: Low

Impact on setting of heritage asset: Low

**Overall impact on significance: Low**

Extent of impact: Low

Potential heritage benefits: Creation of additional room exploiting existing window and fireplace features. Rental income benefit as 1. above.

4. External works: dismantling of yard wall on south east side of the Gate and its replacement with railings on a dwarf wall. Landscaping of yard areas on both sides on the south side of the Gate.

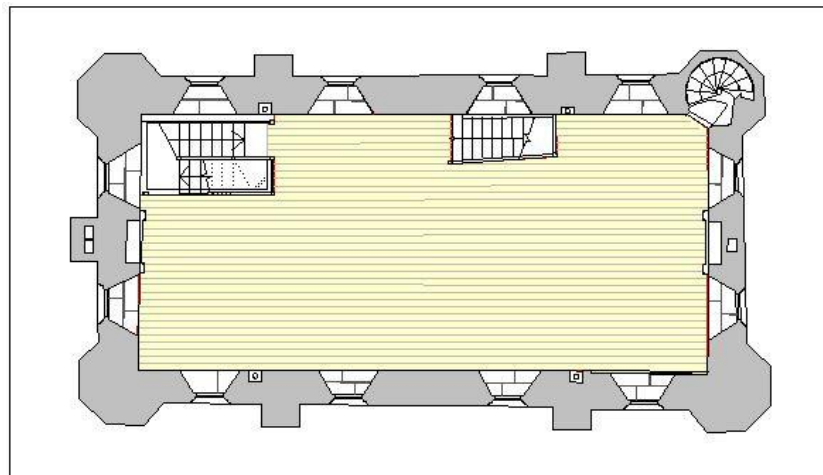
Impact on historic fabric: Low

Impact on setting of heritage asset: Medium

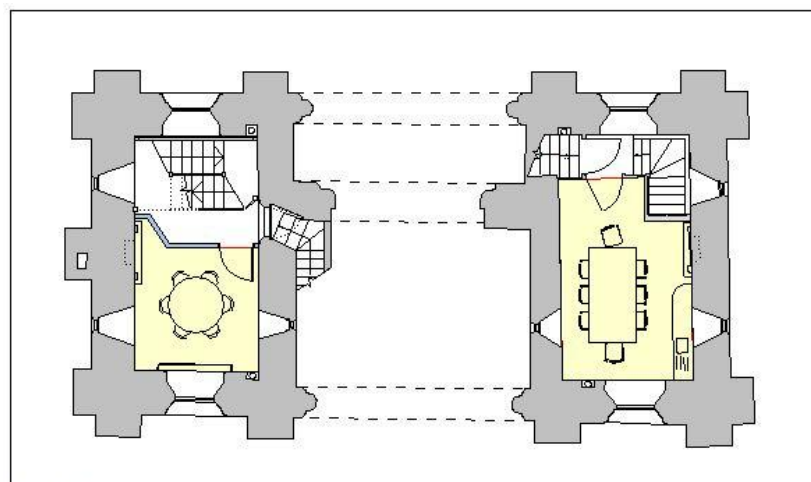
**Overall impact on significance: Low**

Extent of impact: Low

Potential heritage benefits: The removal of a wall which partially masks the south elevation of the Gate



Second Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



Ground Floor Plan

### **3.0 Mitigation**

The impact of item 4 in section 2.3 above.

The removal of this masking wall will enable the whole of the south elevation of the Gate to be seen from Abbey Street. In the process of doing this the unsightly exposed footings of the existing wall will be removed and will be replaced by a dwarf wall built to same line re-using the bricks to be salvaged from the wall and surmounted by relatively transparent railings.

The restoration of the Gate is an opportunity to bring this building back into economically viable use which will generate income for the on-going preservation of both the Gate and the Ruins. The proposals are light touch and flexible so that the possibility of the building's reverting back to public or community use in the long term will remain. The completion of the project will mean that the unsightly temporary scaffold tunnel, fan and roof which currently conceal much of the building from view will be removed.

The establishment of the resource room within the Gate will provide a valuable orientation point for educational and visitor tour activities originating at Reading Museum. This will revive the traditional role of the Gate in visitors' experience of the Ruins. There will also be regular opportunities to visit the tenanted upper rooms within the gate as part of pre-arranged tours.

## 4.0 Bibliography

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Monuments and find spots within the Abbey Quarter  
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Reading Abbey Ruins Records Search Project  
Berkshire Archaeology Historic Environment Record  
Access to Online Database: via [Heritage Gateway](#)  
Information on HER Services: [Berkshire Archaeology HER](#)

The Abbey Gate Reading. Condition Survey, Investigations and Repairs  
Reading Borough Council / HCC Property Services June 2103

Conservation Plan August 2015 'Revealing Reading's Abbey Quarter'  
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