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Heritage Appraisal – South Block Extension
Abbey Gardens, Abbey Street, Reading RG1 3BA
July 2026

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1 Introduction

1.1 The following Heritage Appraisal has been prepared in support of a planning application at Abbey Gardens, Abbey Street, Reading RG1 3BA.

1.2 The building is a modern part 7/part 9 storey office block. It is not statutorily listed, nor is it situated within a designated conservation area. It is however located in relatively close proximity to the Grade I listed and Scheduled Ancient Monument, Reading Abbey Ruins, and the Grade II listed Reading Gaol.

1.3 Prior Approval applications (PL/25/0202 & PL/25/0918) have been approved for the change of use of the building from office to residential use. A subsequent application (PL/26/0091) for works to remodel and reclad the facades of the building to reflect their new residential use was approved on 11 June 2026.

1.4 This application relates to the infilling of the existing void beneath the eastern projecting wing to the south block. This will internalise the space and provide additional accommodation at ground and lower ground floor levels.

1.5 The purpose of this Heritage Appraisal is to assess the impact of the proposals upon the host building and their effect upon the setting of surrounding designated heritage assets. This appraisal is restricted to above ground assets only.

1.6 This appraisal has been produced with reference to the heritage values set out in Historic England's 'Conservation Principles' (2008) and takes account of Historic England's guidance note 'Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3: The Setting of Heritage Assets' 2017.

1.7 This Heritage Appraisal should be read in conjunction with the architectural drawings prepared by SADA Architecture Ltd.

1.8 The author of this appraisal is Hannah Walker (BA (Hons) Oxon MSc IHBC) who has extensive experience in dealing with proposals that affect the historic environment. She has 15 years of local authority experience, including 10 years as a Principal Conservation & Design Officer at the London Borough of Camden. She also has experience in the private sector, preparing heritage statements and appraising the significance of historic buildings. She has trained as a historian, has a specialist qualification in historic building conservation and is a full member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC).

1.9 The report has been reviewed and approved by Kate Graham MA (Hons) PG Dip Cons AA, Director of The Heritage Practice.

2 Site and surroundings

2.1 Abbey Street is located to the east of Reading town centre. It is secondary in character and runs north from King's Road.

2.2 Abbey Gardens is a modern office block with frontages to Abbey Street, King's Road and the River Kennet. It is primarily orientated north-south and has three distinct sections (north, central and south blocks) with two projecting wings of different lengths to the east, and a small projection to the west, at the far northern end of the building.

2.3 The building increases in height from north to south, with between 5 and 8 storeys of accommodation, set over a ground floor and with plant in a mansard type roof.

2.4 The building has glazed curtain wall facades with a blue-green tint to the glass and obscure glazed spandrel panels at low level to each floor. The glazing presents as horizontal strips, broken up only by intermediate recessed stone pilasters which rise the full height of the building.

2.5 The upper floors slightly oversail the ground floor accommodation, where there is a stone base, consisting of square section columns and a chamfered detail which visually supports the glazing above. There are some open areas beneath the building at ground floor level, notably to the eastern projecting wing at the southern end of the building.

2.6 Flat sections of facade to Abbey Street are interspersed with canted elements, creating a strong sense of articulation and a distinctive profile and building line. The eastern projecting elements are also chamfered, softening their appearance in views from the east.

2.7 The roofscape currently consists of separate mansard structures to the north, central and southern blocks. These are flat topped, with sloping sides, clad in standing seam metal. Whilst most of the accommodation at roof level is fully enclosed, there is an open topped plant area on the eastern wing of the central block.

2.8 The surrounding context is highly varied in terms of the age, typology, scale, materials and architectural design of the buildings. The medieval remains of Reading Abbey and the Abbey Mill sit to the NE and west of the application site, as well as the Abbey Gate, originally dating from the 12th-14th centuries, but remodelled by George Gilbert Scott in 1861. There are a cluster of robust Victorian and Edwardian civic, educational and ecclesiastical buildings to the NW and NE, including the Shire Hall (Grade II), Assize Courts (Grade II) and the Church of St James, with its associated former school and presbytery, all Grade II listed.

2.9 The most dominant built form in the area immediately surrounding the application site are the large office blocks of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including on the western side of Abbey Street, along King's Road and 'The Blade' building to the north.

2.10 King's Road is a busy thoroughfare running east-west through the town centre, to the south of the application site. This is commercial in character. Here there are a combination of two and three storey Victorian terraced properties, with retail units at ground floor level. These are generally of red brick or faced in painted render. Interspersed amongst these historic properties are a variety of modern residential and commercial blocks, built to a larger scale. This modern development is primarily faced in brickwork of varying hues, relieved with cladding panels and areas of painted render.

3 Heritage Assets

3.1 The setting of heritage assets is a relatively broad concept. It is defined in the Glossary to the NPPF as 'The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.' This means that setting includes how an asset is experienced in its context, as well as any aspects of its setting which contribute to its overall significance.

3.2 Historic England's Good Practice Advice Note 3: Setting of Heritage Assets (GPA3) was issued in July 2015. The guidance outlines an approach to quantifying the effect of development proposals on the setting of heritage assets. This guidance has been taken into consideration when assessing the impact of the current proposals.

3.3 It sets out that at paragraph 9 of the Historic England guidance that 'Setting is not a heritage asset, nor a heritage designation, though land within a setting may itself be designated. Its importance lies in what it contributes to the significance of the heritage asset. This depends on a wide range of physical elements within, as well as perceptual and associational attributes pertaining to, the heritage asset's surroundings.'

3.4 The importance of setting, and the degree to which it can be affected, is therefore inextricably linked to the contribution which the setting of a heritage asset makes to its significance. The setting of a listed building in a densely built-up locality could in theory encompass a wide variety of buildings. In order for setting to be important and to be appropriately protected in planning decisions, it must contribute positively to the overall significance of the heritage asset.

3.5 The application site is located within a densely developed urban area and forms part of network of streets and spaces which contain buildings of varying age, typology and character. It is an eclectic townscape with a variety of uses, architectural styles and materials sitting cheek by jowl with one another. This is characteristic of urban areas where development has taken place slowly and organically over time, and without comprehensive or formal town planning.
This creates a complex, layered effect within the urban environment where larger buildings sit beside those of more modest scale. In these circumstances, the setting of any surrounding designated heritage assets is generally a visual construct.

Statutorily listed buildings

3.6 There are two statutorily listed buildings which have the potential to be affected by the proposals. The remains of Reading Abbey are also a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The full listing and scheduling descriptions for these buildings are contained at Appendix A of this Heritage Appraisal.

3.7 The site is also located close to a number of other statutorily listed buildings, as detailed below. However, due to the relative townscape position of the sites and the effect of intervening built form on intervisibility, the proposals are not considered to affect the setting of these listed buildings. The Council have confirmed in their pre-application advice that due to the nature of the proposals there would be no direct impact upon these heritage assets.

1. Abbey Mill Ruins (Grade II)
2. 10 Abbots Walk (Grade II)
3. 11-12 Abbots Walk (Grade II)
4. Archway Connecting Forbury Gardens to Abbey Ruins, including Retaining Walls, Flanking Path to Abbey Ruins (Grade II*)
5. Assize Courts (Grade II)
6. Shire Hall (Grade II)

7. Abbey Gate (Grade I)

Abbey Ruins (Grade I)
Reading Abbey: a Cluniac and Benedictine monastery and Civil War earthwork (Scheduled Monument)

3.8 Reading Abbey was founded by Henry I in 1121 and had extensive precincts, running north from the River Kennet to Plummery Wall, and from St Laurence's in the west to the east side of Reading Gaol.

3.9 The remains of the Abbey are constructed in Caen stone, quarry flint and Taynton stone and are consistent with mainstream architecture of the Norman period. The remains are fragmentary in nature, as much of the stone was dispersed into building projects elsewhere after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the late 1530s. The remains survive in picturesque groupings, set within a landscape of paths and neatly mown lawn.

3.10 The Abbey Ruins are historically significant as an important surviving element of the medieval development and life of the town, providing evidential value. They are an excellent example of a medieval monastic complex and have considerable potential for the survival of archaeological material within the confines of the complex.

3.11 Whilst the Abbey only survives in fragments, there are important Romanesque sculptural elements, such as the excavated cloister capitals, and items which were excavated in the 1950s and have since been moved into museum settings. The ruins provide a peaceful and attractive juxtaposition with later townscape elements.

3.12 The Abbey Ruins are of communal value for their longstanding contribution to a sense of place, and the many generations of local people and visitors who have experienced them

3.13 Within the site, the immediate setting to the ruins has a green and verdant character, with neat lawns and mature tree cover around the SW corner of the precinct. Beyond the complex however, the ruins are set within a modern, town centre context and there are views of surrounding development from the 19th to 21st centuries from within the site.

3.14 The current Abbey Gardens is a rather stark and modern element in the setting of the ruins, particularly in views from Chestnut Walk, which runs along the northern end of the River Kennet. The building is particularly pronounced due to its blue-green glazed curtain walling and the reflective qualities of the glass, as well as the distinct tonal contrast with the surrounding brickwork and stone buildings. The roofscape currently houses redundant plant. Reflecting this use, it has solid, unrelieved roof slopes which have a deadening effect upon the building and emphasise the massing of the roof structure. There are also industrial ventilation grilles which clutter and compromise its appearance. Consequently, the building exerts a minor negative impact upon the setting of the listed and scheduled ruins.

Reading Gaol (Grade II)

3.15 A house of correction stood on this site from 1786, but due to overcrowding and dilapidation, a new building was commissioned in the early 1840s, opening in 1844.

3.16 Reading Gaol has evidential significance for its spatial planning and radial arrangement, which reflected trends for solitary confinement in prisons and the practice of constant surveillance of prisoners.

3.17 The building has historic and communal value as a major institutional building within the town and for the long association of the site with prison use. It has associative historic interest with Oscar Wilde who was imprisoned there for 18 months in 1895-97 and

wrote 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' about his time in the prison.

3.18 Reading Gaol was designed by the eminent Victorian architect George Gilbert Scott and is one of his important early works. It has an impressive, fortress like character and robust appearance, with red brick walls and a well-articulated roofscape with castellations. This architectural character however is not easily appreciable from outside the site due to the effect of the very tall brickwork walls which were constructed in the 1970s as part of its modern prison use.

3.19 There is intervisibility between the application site and the listed building across the River Kennet. However, the very tall boundary wall obscure views of its distinctive cruciform plan and attractive elevations, as do the significant 1970s additions within the southern section of the site. At present, Abbey Gardens exerts a neutral effect upon the setting of the listed building.

Conservation Areas

3.20 The nearest conservation area is the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area. However, the eastern boundary of the designation is positioned around 130m to the west of the site, along King's Road. Given this distance, and the position of intervening built form, the proposals are not considered to have the potential to affect the setting of the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area.

4 Assessment of the proposals

4.1 The following section provides an assessment of the proposals in relation to the host building, as well as their impact upon the setting of surrounding designated heritage assets. It will go on to consider them in relation to the relevant statutory, national and local heritage policy framework.

4.2 The proposals are for the infilling of the existing void beneath the eastern projecting wing, which sits at the far southern end of the south block. At present the upper floors of the building are supported on columns and there is open space beneath the building, with steps and a ramp connecting Kings Road with the riverside walk areas. There is already some internalised space beneath the building, with glazed elevations to the west, and a staircase to the east, which rises up through the eastern façade of the building.

4.3 New walls will be introduced beneath the building, set between the existing stone columns. The walls will continue the northern and southern alignment of the existing glazed elements to the west and will follow the chamfered shape of the building to the east. The existing glazed staircase will be incorporated into the new accommodation.

4.4 The proposed walls will create a new residential frontage beneath the building, faced in Staffordshire Blue Smooth brickwork. New windows will have the same configuration and arrangement as those approved over the upper floors, as part of the remodelling and recladding of the building and will be vertically aligned with them. They will have the same dark grey powder coated aluminium frames.

4.5 The proposed infilling beneath the building and the associated new frontages will provide a solid visual base to the existing building where there is currently a rather incongruous void. The existing square stone piers and chamfered stone frame beneath the upper floors will remain fully expressed, with the infill panels set between and beneath these elements.

4.6 At present the void beneath the building is rather dark and unwelcoming area, with steps, ramps and handrails creating a cluttered appearance. The proposals will activate and animate this part of the building and in turn the streetscene along Kings Road and the adjacent riverside walk.

4.7 The proposals will sit comfortably in relation to the approved façade changes associated with the building's new residential use. They will be positioned adjacent to other areas of approved brick infill panel and simple punched openings. The use of matching materials and fenestration will provide visual consistency with these elements, as well as the upper floors, and will integrate the proposed development into the overall architectural approach of the scheme.

4.8 The proposed extension will be modest in terms of its size, and subordinate to the overall scale of the building. It will infill an existing void beneath the building and will follow the chamfered shape and footprint of the projecting wing, whilst remaining setback from the upper floors.

4.9 The proposed extension will be visible from Kings Road and from the riverside walk. From these public realm vantage points it will sit comfortably as part of the adjacent approved ground floor treatment and in relation to the new residential character of the development.

Impact of the proposals upon the setting of affected heritage assets

Reading Abbey Ruins

4.10 Abbey Gardens currently exerts a minor negative effect upon the setting of the Abbey Ruins. The proposals are situated in the far southern section of the development and

some distance from the Ruins. Most areas at ground and lower ground floor level are already internalised and due to the setback position of their walls, create a dark and rather recessive character at the base of the building. The proposed infill walls, in dark brickwork, will have a similar visual effect form the riverside walk adjacent to the Ruins.

4.11 The proposed extension will be of good quality materials and detailing and will blend seamlessly with the approved residential facades to the building. Taking account of these factors, the proposals will have a neutral effect upon the setting of Reading Abbey Ruins.

Reading Gaol

4.12 The degree of intervisibility between the application site and the listed Reading Gaol is lower than with the adjacent Abbey Ruins. The tall 1970s brickwork wall has a particularly strong effect in blocking views between the sites and screening much of the lower parts of the listed building from public realm vantage points outside of its site.

4.13 The proposed extension will have a limited visual impact upon the building in views from the river path, where Reading Gaol is set to the side of views towards the application site. The tall modern brickwork walls are the most notable element of the site from these vantage points. Given the modest scale of the extension, its position beneath the existing footprint of the building and its complementary design and materials, there will be no harmful impact upon the setting of Reading Gaol. Where it is visible, the introduction of a residential frontage in place of the current void will be appropriate and traditional, providing a solid visual base to the composition.

Summary

4.14 The proposals are modest in terms of their scale and impact. The use of the same architectural language as the approved domestic façade remodelling will ensure that the infilling of the void beneath the building will sit comfortably within the overall context of the building. Due to its low-level position and integrated design, the proposals will have a neutral/minor positive effect upon the setting of the adjacent listed buildings.

Assessment of the proposals in relation to the relevant heritage policy framework

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

4.15 The proposals are considered to preserve the setting of surrounding listed buildings, in line with s.66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

The National Planning Policy Framework 2024

4.16 This Heritage Appraisal has defined the significance of affected heritage assets and the contribution made by their setting. The impact of the proposals upon this significance has been appraised, in line with paragraphs 207 and 208.

4.17 The proposals will make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness in line with paragraph 210. The Council has approved proposals to remodel and reclad the façade of the building in line with its new residential use, and the design of the proposed extension will sit comfortably in relation to those, in terms of materiality, design, proportions and detailing.

4.18 Great weight has been given to the conservation of designated heritage assets, in accordance with paragraph 212. There will be a neutral/minor positive effect upon the character, setting and significance of adjacent heritage assets and the wider historic environment from the proposals.

Reading Borough Council Local Plan 2019

4.19 The proposals comply with the relevant sections of design policies CC7: Design and the public realm and CR2: Design in Central Reading. The proposed extension will be located in a logical position beneath the existing footprint of the building and will internalise an existing void. In terms of the scale of the proposals, they will be subordinate to the overall building. Its materials and architectural detailing will form part of the overall architecturally coherent approach to the building's new residential facades, and it will be of high design quality, maintaining and enhancing the character of this part of Reading town centre. The proposals will be complementary to surrounding heritage assets and the general character of the wider townscape.

4.20 In relation to Policy EN1: Protection and enhancement of the historic environment and Policy EN6: New development in a historic context, the proposals will have a neutral/minor positive effect upon the setting and significance of adjacent statutorily listed and scheduled buildings. The use of brickwork to match the floors directly above the proposed extension, and windows of the same proportions, alignment and materiality, will blend with the overall design and architectural approach of the scheme. This in turn will respect and reinforce the historic character of the surrounding area, as well as adjacent heritage assets.

5 Conclusion

5.1 The proposals are for the infilling of the existing void beneath the eastern projecting wing to the southern block of Abbey Gardens.

5.2 Abbey Gardens in its current form is a prominent element within the townscape, particularly in views from the east around the River Kennet and within the setting of the Abbey Ruins and Reading Gaol.

5.3 The proposals are small scale and modest in terms of their impact, restricted to the internalisation of existing open space beneath the upper floors of the building. Thus, there will be no harmful impact upon its overall form, shape or profile.

5.4 The proposed extension will be located at low level and will continue existing building lines, as well as the setback nature of existing ground and lower ground floor infill to the building, allowing the supporting stone framework to remain a legible feature.

5.5 The materiality and design of the proposed extension will blend with the approved treatment to adjacent areas at ground floor level as well as over the upper floors, and will sit seamlessly in relation to the new residential aesthetic of the building.

5.6 This Appraisal has demonstrated that due to the very minor effect of the proposals there will be a neutral/minor positive impact upon the setting of surrounding designated heritage assets and the historic townscape.

5.7 The proposals comply with s.66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework 2024 and the adopted policies of the Reading Borough Council Local Plan 2019.

Appendix A – Statutory listing and scheduling descriptions

Forbury Gardens, Reading Abbey Ruins (Grade I)
(Formerly listed under Abbots Walk)

Founded 1121 by Henry I and intended to be England's principal Cluniac House. Extensive precincts stretched from the Plummery Wall (qv) to the Kennet and from St Laurence's (at the west gate) (qv) to the east side of the Gaol (qv). Caen stone, quarry flint and Taynton stone.

From excavation and from what remains it is clear that the Abbey with its apse and apsidal transept chapels was in the mainstream of Norman architecture. It may have been vaulted but insufficient research has been done on this aspect, which would have made it remarkable indeed. The picturesque surviving fragments are a rubble core stripped almost entirely of its facing stone. The remains are principally grouped to the south of St James's R C School. They include portions of the north and south transepts, the chapter-house (which must have resembled that at Durham), the west wall of the Dorter and the rere-dorter.

Fragmentary remains in the Forbury Gardens are listed separately. A further stretch of wall runs towards Abbey Street behind Abbey Wall. For the Gatehouse, Hospitium see separate items. Reading Abbey's importance now lies in the field of Romanesque sculpture. Fragments were disposed as far away as Shiplake, many are still incorporated in walls through-out Reading and several cart-loads of carved stones abound in the Forbury Gardens. The date of the carved fragments is probably not later than 1136 (when Henry I was buried in the chancel) and is more likely to be circa 1130. The best items which have come to light, many excavated in the 1950s and probably from a cloister, are now in Reading Museum (some, including the Coronation of the Virgin, were previously at the V and A where they were on display). The excavated cloister capitals include the earliest known representation of the Coronation of the Virgin and one with two bearded angels. Fragments of decoration include masks, chevron and more especially beakhead, probably its earliest use in England. A large stone with interlace now used as font in St James' RC Church (qv). (Ancient Monuments, Berks No 1).

Scheduled Monument - Reading Abbey: a Cluniac and Benedictine monastery and Civil War earthwork.

From the time of St Augustine's mission to re-establish Christianity in AD 597 to the reign of Henry VIII, monasticism formed an important facet of both religious and secular life in the British Isles. Settlements of religious communities, including monasteries, were built to house communities of monks, canons (priests), and sometimes lay-brothers, living a common life of religious observance under some form of systematic discipline. It is estimated from documentary evidence that over 700 monasteries were founded in England. These ranged in size from major communities with several hundred members to tiny establishments with a handful of brethren. They belonged to a wide variety of different religious orders, each with its own philosophy. As a result, they vary considerably in the detail of their appearance and layout, although all possess the basic elements of church, domestic accommodation for the community, and work buildings. Monasteries were inextricably woven into the fabric of medieval society, acting not only as centres of worship, learning and charity, but also, because of the vast landholdings of some orders, as centres of immense wealth and political influence. They were established in all parts of England, some in towns and others in the remotest of areas. Many monasteries acted as the foci of wide networks including parish churches, almshouses, hospitals, farming estates and tenant villages. Benedictine monasticism had its roots in the rule written about AD 530 by St Benedict of Nursia for his own abbey at Monte Cassino. Benedict had not intended to establish an order of monasteries

and wider adoption of his rule came only gradually. The first real attempt to form a Benedictine order came only in 1216. The Benedictine monks, who wore dark robes, came to be known as `black monks'. These dark robes distinguished them from Cistercian monks who became known as `white monks' on account of their light coloured robes. Over 150 Benedictine monasteries were founded in England. As members of a highly successful order many Benedictine houses became extremely wealthy and influential. Their wealth can frequently be seen in the scale and flamboyance of their buildings. Benedictine monasteries made a major contribution to many facets of medieval life and all examples exhibiting significant surviving archaeological remains are worthy of protection.

Reading Abbey is 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.

Details
The monument, which consists of four separate areas, includes the known surviving remains of Reading Abbey, the surviving parts of the associated mill and hospitium and the site of a building believed to be the abbey stables. The abbey was established in 1121 by Henry I as a cell of the Cluniac order, the parent abbey being at Cluny in Burgundy; by the mid 13th century it had transferred obedience to the Benedictine order. Through the 13th and early 14th centuries the foundation flourished and by the mid 14th century, it had become one of the ten richest abbeys in the country. In the 16th century the Abbey fell victim to the purges of the Dissolution and was forcibly taken by the Crown in 1539. The monks were evicted and the last Abbot, Hugh Farrington, hanged at the Abbey Gate. The Abbey buildings passed into the hands of Lord Somerset, protector to Edward VI, who demolished most of the church and much of the abbey buildings. Thus today the Abbey survives largely as a ruin. Walls stand almost to their original height but have been robbed of all facing stone so that only the core survives. The ruins, which are listed at Grade I, consist of the south transept and chapter house, separated by a once roofed passage over which the treasury was located. Further south, towards the River Kennet, stands the west wall of the parlour and warming room with the dormitory above. Adjacent to the river lay the necessarium or toilet block. The cloisters were to the west of the chapter house and were flanked along the southern side by the refectory, the south wall of which still stands to a height in excess of 2.5m. The site of the gateway to the inner precinct survives to the west of Abbot's Walk, though its present form is the result of rather heavy restoration by Gilbert Scott in 1860, following a collapse of the structure. The gateway is listed as a Grade I building. To the east the Abbey grounds extended to Forbury Road, and to the south-east to the bank of the River Kennet. Excavations in this area in 1970, within the confines of Reading Prison, located an Apsidal chapel, demonstrating the potential for survival of archaeological evidence in this area of the site. At the western extremity of the abbey complex, in what is today the churchyard of St Lawrence's church, a hospitium was located. Founded in 1189-93 by Abbot Hugh II, it was dedicated to John the Baptist and consisted of a residence for 26 poor, a refectory and an accommodation block for visitors. A portion of this, rebuilt in the 15th century, survives incorporated into the fabric of a modern municipal building north of the graveyard. To the south of the main abbey complex and spanning Holy Brook, is a single 13th century arch, all that remains of the abbey mill. The mill wheel is thought to have been positioned to the east of this arch. Additional lesser medieval buildings, possibly associated with the abbey complex, have been recorded in this vicinity. These include the remains of a bakehouse to the north of the mill, discovered in 1860, and a building to

the west, located by excavations in advance of development in 1976. A substantial mound, now incorporated into Forbury Gardens as a 19th century landscape feature, is thought to be a reworked Civil War earthwork. This in turn may have been constructed using the remains of a motte which is recorded as having been built in the abbey precinct in 1150 and destroyed in 1152. All modern buildings, structures, and roads are excluded from the scheduling although the ground beneath them is included.

Reading Gaol (main building) former Her Majesty's Prison, Forbury Road, Reading, Berkshire (Grade II)

Summary:
County gaol, 1842-4 by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynthon Moffatt, altered c.1970. Certain buildings and parts of the buildings are excluded from the Listing, as is made clear in the List entry.

Reasons for Designation:
The main building at Reading Gaol, of 1842-4 by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynthon Moffatt, is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

* Architectural interest: an impressive, fortress-like design that represents an early work by one of England's foremost C19 architects;

* Planning interest: a pioneering English example of a radial-plan prison built for the newly-introduced 'separate system' of constant surveillance and solitary confinement;

* Historic interest: strongly associated with the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, who spent eighteen months of his two-year sentence there and later immortalised the institution in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'.

History:
Reading Gaol stands adjacent to the town centre, on a plot of riverside land once occupied by the cloister and burial ground of Reading Abbey. The original County Gaol was in Castle Street, but moved to a new building on the present site in 1786. By the 1840s this had become overcrowded and dilapidated, and in 1842 a design competition was held for a new prison, which was to house 200 criminals and 20 debtors, with space for 100 additional cells and a court house. The winning design by George Gilbert Scott and William Bonython Moffatt was based on the then recently-completed New Model Prison at Pentonville in London. Its plan comprised a central hub and a series of radiating galleried wings containing individual cells, which was designed to implement the ‘separate system’ of solitary confinement and regular surveillance, introduced in Britain under the 1839 Prisons Act and pioneered ten years earlier at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, USA. This type would become ubiquitous during the course of the C19, with some twenty radial-plan prisons built in England during the period 1839-77.

The building contract was initially given to John Jay of London, but his company went bankrupt three months after construction began in August 1842, and the work was completed by Messrs George and William Baker. The new gaol, with cells for 250 men and women and a debtors’ ward, was ready for occupation in July 1844, by which time the need for additional cells, a separate laundry block and the rebuilding of the old perimeter wall had driven the final cost up from an initial estimate of £24,000 to an eventual total of more than £40,000.

Reading continued as the County Gaol for the next 70 years. Its most famous inmate was Oscar Wilde, who served the latter part of his sentence there between November 1895 and May 1897; he described his experience in 'De Profundis', written during his imprisonment.

Reading Gaol was immortalised in Wilde’s epic poem 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', first published in 1898. The poem was a critique of the Victorian prison system, and describes the execution of one of his fellow inmates. It was

initially published under the name C.3.3, Wilde's prison number. Wilde had been imprisoned in 1895 for 'acts of gross indecency with other male persons' and served two years with hard labour.

Wilde was convicted under the Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, known as the Labouchère Amendment (1885), which criminalised all sexual acts between men. It was part-repealed in 1967 by the Sexual Offences Act, which partially decriminalised sex between men over the age of 21.

During his imprisonment at Reading Gaol, Wilde wrote a 50,000-word letter to Lord Alfred Douglas (also known as Bosie), who had been his lover. This was later published as De Profundis (1905). The Oscar Wilde Memorial Walk was laid out at the back of Reading Gaol in 2000 to commemorate Wilde, his work and his imprisonment.

The gaol closed in November 1915; it served as an internment centre from 1916 until 1919, and parts of it were let to various government departments during the inter-war period. In the latter part of WWII it was used as a military prison by the Canadian Army, reopening in 1946 as an overflow prison for men serving short sentences, before becoming a borstal in 1951. In 1969-70 it was returned to use as an adult prison; this involved numerous changes to the fabric, including the refenestration of the cells and the demolition and rebuilding of the gatehouse and perimeter wall. Between 1992 and its closure at the end of 2013 Reading served as a remand centre and Young Offenders Institution.

George Gilbert Scott (1811-78) was perhaps the most successful, prolific and influential British architect of the Victorian period. The son of a Buckinghamshire clergyman and amateur architect, he was articled to the London church architect James Edmeston in 1827 and established his own practice in 1834. His early work, until 1845 in collaboration with William Boynthon Moffatt (1812-87), mostly consisted of workhouses, hospitals and other poor-law buildings. Scott's chief fame, however, was as a builder and restorer of churches, in which he was strongly influenced by the Gothic Revivalist polemics of AWN Pugin. Scott's reputation was firmly established in 1844 with the commission for the vast new Nikolaikirche in Hamburg, Germany, and in the decades that followed his practice became one of the largest in Britain, responsible for hundreds of new churches - from Oxbridge college chapels to the new cathedrals at Edinburgh and Christchurch, New Zealand - and for the restoration of hundreds more, where his often destructive approach drew bitter criticism from William Morris and the fledgling conservation movement. Major secular commissions included the Albert Memorial, the Midland Hotel at St Pancras' Station, the Foreign Office on Whitehall (all in London) and the universities of Glasgow and Bombay, India. Scott was knighted in 1872, and served as president of the RIBA from 1873 to 1876.
Details
County gaol, 1842-4 by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynthon Moffatt, altered c.1970.

MATERIALS: red brick with Bath stone dressings, mostly now renewed in concrete. Roofs originally of slate, now replaced with asbestos tiles* (not of special interest).

PLAN: the main prison building originally stood within a square enclosure of approximately three acres, surrounded by a high boundary wall with octagonal corner towers and a large, multi-towered gatehouse complex on the north side providing accommodation for resident staff (the governor, deputy governors, warders, matron and chaplain) as well as additional security. Against the north wall and alongside the gatehouse was a block containing the women's cells.

All this was demolished c.1970, leaving only the cruciform main building. This comprises four wings, designated A to D, converging on a central semi-octagon. The upper three floors of

A, B and C wings contained the male felons' cells. Originally there were twelve on each floor in B wing and twenty-five in the longer A and C wings, accessed on the upper two floors by means of galleries connecting via the central octagon. The basement beneath A wing originally contained the prison kitchens, and – in a sealed-off area to the west, accessed via a tunnel (now demolished) leading outside the prison wall – a munitions store for the Berkshire militia; the latter space was absorbed into the prison proper in 1878 and was last used as the prison hospital. The basement under B wing contained baths, punishment cells, a knife room and an officers' cleansing room.

D wing was aligned with the old gatehouse and formed the entrance to the main building. The ground floor and basement contained the debtors' cells: first-class debtors on the ground floor opposite the governor's office and visiting rooms, second-class debtors in the basement along with the reception cells and coal store. The first and second floors contained the chaplain's and schoolmaster's offices, a room from which the governor could oversee activity in the central octagon, and – rising through both floors in the centre of the wing – the prison chapel. Executions took place on a scaffold built against the eastern side of the wing.

As well as the rebuilding of the perimeter walls, the works of c.1970 saw the construction of a number of new buildings within the old prison yards. These are plain red-brick structures of one and two storeys, and include: a new gatehouse at the north-west corner of the site; an administration block with visiting and interview rooms, abutting D wing to the north; and, in the angle between A and B wings, an education and training building, which now also contains the prison chapel and kitchens. In the angle between B and C wings is a former workshop of c.1910, a single-storey brick building with a part-glazed roof. These structures, and the rebuilt perimeter wall that encloses them, are not of special interest and are excluded from the listing*.

EXTERIOR: Scott and Moffatt's design displays the Tudor-Gothic details employed in their workhouse and hospital designs, here combined with castellated elements – battlements to the entrance block and central octagon, machicolations under the eaves throughout - intended to give a fortress-like aspect. The visual inspiration for the design, which was much criticised for its elaboration and expense, is said to have been Warwick Castle. The alterations of c.1970 greatly changed the building's external appearance: the original two-light cell windows were replaced with single square openings containing barred double-glazed window units* (not of special interest), and most of the stone-dressed elements were replaced in concrete. (An unaltered original cell window survives in the basement of D wing.)

D wing is the main focus for architectural display. The projecting frontispiece at the northern end is fully crenellated and features tall ridged and corbelled chimney stacks, diapered brickwork and mullion-and-transom windows. The ground-floor entrance doorway has been lost, absorbed into a single-storey addition of c.1970. The wing behind is dominated by the tall chapel windows with their simple Gothic tracery. Beneath these, on the western side, are more mullion-and-transom windows, originally to the administrative offices. On the eastern side are the smaller pointed windows of the debtors' cells. In the centre is a larger archway, now bricked up, through which condemned prisoners were led out onto the scaffold.

A, B and C wings have pitched roofs over the central galleried section and flat roofs over the cell blocks on either side. The latter have the square concrete-framed windows installed c.1970; the former terminate in gabled projections with very tall mullion-and-transom windows (of concrete replacing the original stone) which are the main source of light to the internal galleries. There is a similar (and likewise renewed) window where each wing abuts the octagonal hub, the cell blocks terminating in quadrants here to allow light to penetrate the

central space. The octagon itself has a crenellated parapet and a tall central turret, also crenellated, which forms the main stack for the plenum ventilation system.

INTERIORS: these have been much altered, with original features removed and a variety of modern fittings and finishes* applied; the latter are not of special interest. The original cells with their jack-arched brick vaults mostly survive, but have in the majority of cases been doubled up by removing the wall between each pair, while the Tudor-arched entrance doorways now have flat concrete lintels, and renewed doors* (the doors not being of special interest). The metal gallery structures with their curved supporting brackets and cross-braced balustrades are original. The ceiling over the galleries is a pointed brick vault, while the central octagon has a brick vault with moulded stone ribs and corbels, and lozenge-shaped ceiling lights cut through the webs of the vault. Air extracted from vents in the cells originally passed through the space above the vaults and out through the plenum tower. Suspended at first-floor level within the octagon was a glazed Gothic pavilion structure from which prison staff could keep watch on movements in A, B and C wings and (via the tall side windows) in the prison yard outside; the pavilion has been replaced with a modern prefabricated cabin* (not of special interest). In the basement under A wing, the layout of the former munitions store is still legible, despite the inserted ceiling* (not of special interest) and the demolition of the access tunnel. Beneath B wing some original cells survive, including high-security 'punishment' cells for the confinement of violent inmates.

The chapel, later used as a games room, is a double-height space with an arch-braced queen-strut roof and central skylight. It originally contained a multi-tiered timber gallery structure that allowed each prisoner to observe the service from within an enclosed box; this arrangement, designed to minimise contact between prisoners in accordance with the 'separate system', can still be seen at Lincoln Castle but has been completely lost at Reading along with all other fittings and decoration. Elsewhere in D wing the layout of the offices survives, as do some of the debtors' cells.

* Pursuant to s.1 (5A) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 ('the Act') it is declared that these aforementioned features are not of special architectural or historic interest.

This List entry was subject to a Minor Enhancement on 27/06/2017

Appendix B - Relevant historic environment policy

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

Section 66(1) requires that:

In considering whether to grant planning permission or permission in principle for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority or, as the case may be, the Secretary of State shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

The National Planning Policy Framework (2024)

The revised National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies and how these are expected to be applied. There is a general presumption in favour of sustainable development within national planning policy guidance.

Paragraph 207
In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets' importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance. As a minimum the relevant historic environment record should have been consulted and the heritage assets assessed using appropriate expertise where necessary.

Paragraph 208
Local planning authorities should identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise. They should take this into account when considering the impact of a proposal on a heritage asset, to avoid or minimise any conflict between the heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal.

Paragraph 210
In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
- the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

Paragraph 212
When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

Reading Borough Council Local Plan 2019

The relevant sections of the policies have been cited below.

Policy CC7: Design and the public realm
All development must be of high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located. The various components of development form, including: -
• Scale: height and massing; and
• Architectural detail and materials will be assessed to ensure that the development proposed makes a positive contribution to the

following urban design objectives: -
• Character - a place with its own identity and sense of place

Developments will also be assessed to ensure that they: -
• Respond positively to their local context and create or reinforce local character and distinctiveness, including protecting and enhancing the historic environment of the Borough and providing value to the public realm;
• Are visually attractive as a result of good high quality built forms and spaces, the inclusion of public art and appropriate materials and landscaping.

Policy EN1: Protection and enhancement of the historic environment
Historic features, areas of historic importance and other elements of the historic environment, including their settings will be protected and where possible enhanced. This will include:

• Listed Buildings;
• Scheduled Monuments

All proposals will be expected to protect and where possible enhance the significance of heritage assets and their settings, the historic character and local distinctiveness of the area in which they are located. Proposals should seek to avoid harm in the first instance. Any harm to or loss of a heritage asset should require clear and convincing justification, usually in the form of public benefits.

Applications which affect Listed Buildings will not have an adverse impact on those elements which contribute to their special architectural or historic interest including, where appropriate, their settings.

Applications which affect, or have the potential to affect, the significant features of heritage assets should be justified by a Heritage Statement.

Policy EN6: New development in a historic context
In areas characterised by heritage assets, the historic environment will inform and shape new development. New development will make a contribution to the historic character of the area by respecting and enhancing its architectural and visual qualities and considering how heritage considerations can influence the design of new development. When determining planning applications for new development, the following factors will be taken into consideration:

a. The positive contribution of the development to the existing historic townscape (scale, height, mass, proportion, plot size, street form, materials, significant vistas and views, and open space);
b. Sensitivity to historic context;
c. Reflection of borough-wide major heritage themes that contribute to local distinctiveness (e.g. patterned brickwork or former worker terraced housing);
d. Whether development promotes and/or improves access to previously undiscovered or neglected historic significance.

Policy CR2: Design in Central Reading
Applications for development within Central Reading should demonstrate the following attributes:

d. The architectural details and materials used in the central area should be high quality and respect the form and quality of the detailing and materials in areas local to the development site;