

Records of Reading Abbey: a new miscellany

In June this year the Berkshire Record Society will publish a edition of selected Reading Abbey Records, prepared by Professor Brian Kemp.

The volume will contain the text of four original manuscripts: a set of annals; an account of miracles worked by Reading's prized relic, the hand of St James; an account of the ceremonial involved in the monks' annual commemoration of the death of their founder, King Henry I; and a record of the special allowances of food and drink made to the monks to mark the feasts of the Christian year and the anniversaries of a benefactors and others. All are important for the history of the Abbey, and all are here published for the first time.

The first document, the annals, contains much interesting information about the Abbey, including a mention of the lightning strike of 1209 and the severe damage it caused, and also show how the Abbot was involved in national and international affairs.

This is followed by an account of miracles, which describes in great and colourful detail an extraordinary range of illnesses and inflictions that were cured by the power of the hand of St James: a woman from Earley was cured of dropsy; John the Clerk had his speech restored; Edward Haver of Reading was cured of a tumour; Alice, a girl from Essex, had her withered arm restored to strength; a woman from Curridge, near Newbury, was cured of epilepsy; and Osbert, abbot of Notley in Buckinghamshire, who suffered from a 'most grievous affliction of the eyes', which caused him 'intense pain and ... acute torment', found the pain banished and his sight restored.

The third document provides a wonderfully detailed account of the celebrations occurring on the anniversary of the death of the founder, Henry I, which began on the evening before and lasted the whole of the day itself, and involved an elaborate and colourful ceremony. The church was adorned with the finest hangings, the Abbot and senior monks wore rich vestments, candles were placed round the king's tomb, which was wreathed in incense, the Abbey bells were rung, and every priest present celebrated mass.

Finally, we have a list of the feasts for which the monks enjoyed special allowances of food and drink. These are arranged, firstly, by the feasts of the Christian year and, secondly, by the anniversaries of the abbey's chief benefactors, giving altogether a remarkably complete idea of this aspect of life in the abbey in the late thirteenth century

Each appears in its original Latin, along with a translation and an extended introductory essay, placing it in context and explaining its significance.

This is an important volume for anyone interested in the history of the Abbey. It will be launched at a special event in St James's Church on Saturday 23 June. Members of the Friends are welcome to attend.

The book will cost £12.50, but members of the Berkshire Local History Association are being offered copies at the special price of £10, **if ordered before April** (plus £2.50 postage and packing for copies not collected in person). Please order using the form attached.