



A YEAR TO REMEMBER

Reading's Year of Culture in 2016 featured dance, theatre and art exhibitions, successfully repositioning the town as a place where creativity is thriving. **James Wood** picks out some of the highlights

As part of Amy Sharrocks' *Do Rivers Dream of Oceans?* project, locals and visitors to Reading had the opportunity to take a boat out on the river, where they "experienced the town in a different way".

Culture was everywhere in Reading during 2016. Exhibitions in surprising places featured some of the most respected artists in the country, the town's streets teemed with people enjoying dance and art shows and auditoriums throughout the town were packed for theatre and music events. It was a year when outdated perceptions of the town as a place with low levels of artistic engagement were banished for good.

At the beginning of 2016, project and events manager, Zsuzsi Lindsay, at economic development company, Reading UK CIC, was charged with delivering the programme for Reading's 'Year of Culture 2016'. By working with the town's talented arts organisations and commissioning other highly acclaimed artists from outside, one successful event after another has taken place, attracting attention from across the UK and beyond.

Lindsay says that this was achieved by carefully mapping out how the year would take shape.

"When we started to plan Reading's Year of Culture, we felt that a stronger sense of place was needed for the town to help economic growth," she says. "We needed a buzz, a place of identity and to offer something unique."

When news broke in June that archaeologists aimed to not only discover information about Reading Abbey, but were also looking for the bones of Henry I, whose tomb is known to be buried on the Abbey site, this attracted the attention of the international press, with articles published in newspapers from *The New York Times* to *Times of India*.

Elsewhere, tourists flocked to an exhibition in the unusual environs of Reading Prison (pages 29 to 34), based on work Oscar Wilde was inspired to write after his incarceration there. Staged by globally renowned arts organisation Artangel, it featured installations from



TUMBLING TORRENTS

International artist Amy Sharrocks has been exploring people's relationship with water since 2007 and has achieved huge success with her Museum of Water project, which she has taken to different places across the world.

The Year of Culture organisers approached Sharrocks early in 2016 to curate a mini "festival of water" as part of Reading's annual WaterFest event in June.

To get inspired for the project, Sharrocks found herself on a long walk around the town, where she discovered the diverse bodies of water contained within it. These ranged from rivers and canals to swimming pools and lidos.

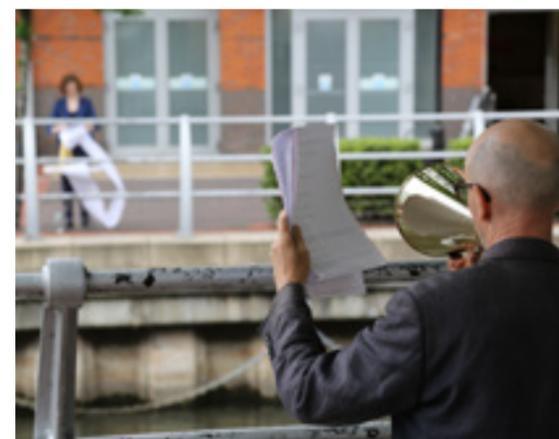
"Often, people who live in big towns and cities have a distant relationship with water. I aim to make people question and examine that, especially in a place where the canal goes right through the city," she says.

The result was a mini festival of water across Reading on 11 June called *Do Rivers Dream of Oceans?* Part of this – *Drifting* – invited people to float down the canal on two boats and see Reading from a new perspective. While this was the hardest part of the project to organise, says Sharrocks, the reaction to it was "wonderful".

"It meant different things to different people," she explains. "There was one older gentleman who couldn't stop talking about the boat that had taken him back to Caversham as a boy. Then there was the tentative 11-year old who went out onto the water on his own. You could see that he felt like he was taking that first step towards independence."

The canal was used in surprising ways too. Performance artists plan b – Daniel Belasco Rogers and Sophia New – surprised shoppers by shouting across the water every text message they had sent each other over a period of a year. This was an examination of modern communication methods, with the artists juxtaposing their most intimate personal feelings for one another with mundane correspondence.

Sharrocks says: "In Reading, people really got the point of the project. They knew they could use the things that we had made available to them, which made the day really interactive."



Above: A water fight with balloons in Forbury Gardens was another highlight of the WaterFest event. Below: Bellowing text messages across the canal.

renowned artists Rita Donagh, Peter Dreher, Marlene Dumas, Robert Gober, Steve McQueen (also a film director, whose *12 Years a Slave* film won a Best Picture Oscar) and archived work from Oscar Wilde himself.

Readings of the playwright and poet's famous *De Profundis* letter, penned in the prison, by actors Ben Whishaw and Ralph Fiennes and singer Patti Smith, drew large audiences.

Reading's Year of Culture has seen theatre ticket sales reportedly up by 20%, as well as a 130% increase in Arts Council funding for projects in the town.

Says Lindsay: "We believe we have demonstrated the creativity of the Reading arts community. It is thanks to all of the people who have made the place and given it that sense of identity."

Reading:UK magazine looks at some of the year's key cultural highlights. 



CROWNING GLORY

Few have attempted to recreate the 12th Century through art, but in 2016, Reading theatre group Reading Between the Lines broke the mould, when it decided to write and perform a play in the town about Henry I's rule of England between 1100 and 1135.

With an excavation project taking place next door at Reading Abbey, which partly involved trying to uncover the remains of Henry I's tomb, the play, *Henry I of England*, ran in November to packed audiences inside St James' Church.

The task to discover more about the time in which the king lived was a challenging one. As the fourth and youngest son of William the Conqueror, Henry I's ascent to the throne was a hotly contested issue. Writer Beth Flintoff worked with academics at Reading University to research the details that would form the narrative of the play.

Flintoff uncovered a dark, murky and exhilarating time, which stoked her enthusiasm when writing the script: "It was really exciting to revisit this world that no-one's written about before – or at least as far as we know. A lot of people don't know much about it," she says.

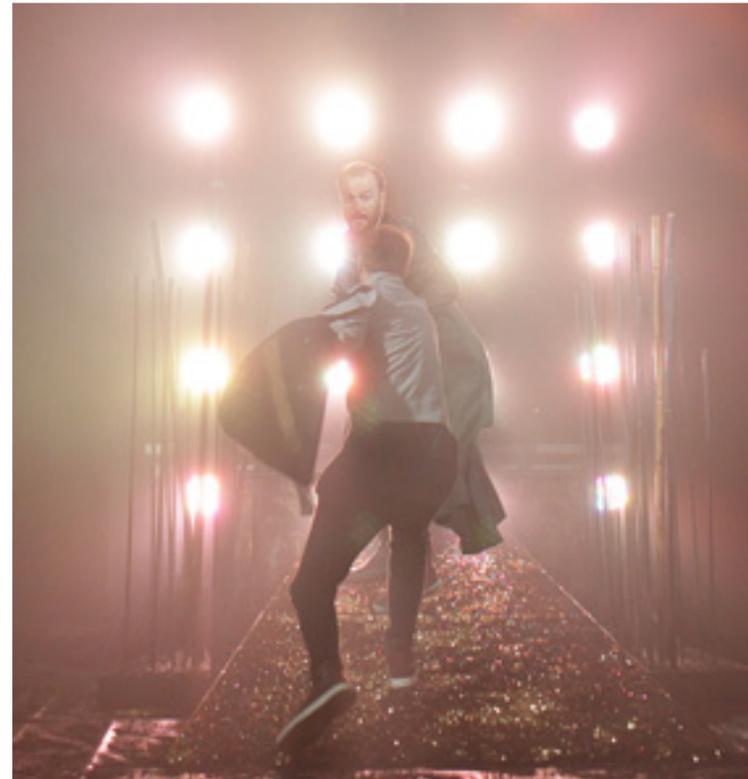
A contemporary reference point for the play was popular fantasy TV show, *Game of Thrones*, which portrays medieval violence: "We were looking at a very brutal world where people are in physical danger all the time; where no system of justice exists yet, other than who is stronger and who has a bigger sword," says Flintoff.

Reading Between the Lines was established by actor Toby Davies, who played Henry I in the show. Toby's wife, Dani, produced it – and all members of the theatre company contributed ideas. These were developed as rehearsals for the production progressed: characters were adapted, scenes were trimmed and a collaborative approach allowed the actors, musicians and producers to have a say in the direction the play was taking.

Another important theme for Flintoff was exploring the role of women in society during Henry I's time, by creating "strong and dominant" female characters. One of the play's actors, Deirdre Mullins, says: "I think it shows how important the women are in this world.



A play about Henry I's rule was performed by local theatre group Reading Between the Lines to sell-out crowds in November. It was the first time the monarch's reign has been explored in theatre.



Even if they didn't have political power on paper, they ran the show in many ways."

Davies says: "The response from the show was better than we could have ever hoped for and we were absolutely thrilled with the five-star reviews it received.

"Feedback on the streets was absolutely phenomenal too. It's amazing how many people were unaware of the fact that Reading has this rich history. It has really surprised a lot of people and hopefully has given them a sense of pride in where they live."

Reading Between the Lines plans to take the play on tour in 2017 before going back to the drawing board to create a sequel to *Henry I of England*. The team will produce a piece of theatre based around the King's later life. Flintoff is reportedly already conducting research with the university to adopt a similar format for the sequel. "This time, Beth's one step ahead," Davies remarks.

And he believes the group's momentum could have a positive influence on the cultural scene in Reading for the months and years to come: "I think there's a responsibility on arts organisations to keep going," he says. "It's important to make people see that bringing in people from outside and engaging with Reading's local talent can be a wonderful thing."



SHINING A LIGHT

Reading's 2016 cultural celebrations came to an end in December, when organisers behind the Year of Culture installed 11 light installations, illuminating landmark buildings across the town for 17 days in the run up to Christmas.

These included the Thames Tower High Striker, a fairground-style interactive lighting of the 15-storey Thames Tower in front of Reading Station; two installations in M&G's No. 3 Forbury Place; the illumination of the Abbey Ruins; pedal powered film nights, and illuminations of a bridge and The Oracle's beacon.

Businesses and artists collaborated on the project, with prominent Reading practice, Peter Brett Associates, developing an interactive app for people to find out more about what was happening during the two-and-a-half weeks.

In December, various landmark buildings around Reading were lit up. Reading UK CIC says the aim of the project was to "shine a light on the town."



TOP BOOKING

In a year of surprising revelations for Reading, many who attended one discussion at the Reading in Reading literature festival at the end of October were surprised to hear Jane Austen spent a year at the Reading Ladies Boarding School.

Helena Kelly's autobiography *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical*, sets out to dispel the notion of the author as a twee bastion of English respectability and instead paints a picture of a fearless political commentator, taking on subjects such as feminism, slavery and the power of the church. A conversation between Kelly and novelist and Austen aficionado Gill Hornby brought many an inquisitive literature enthusiast to the town in the autumn.

Festival organiser Tom Ryan set out to book as many diverse speakers as possible for the festival, from local authors to prominent ex-footballers and much-loved TV personalities.

The event took place at Reading's Olympia Ballroom, which Ryan believes is a relatively unsung venue in terms of its historic importance. It was once used as an asylum for the insane and later served as a gigging venue for rock giants such as The Who and The Rolling Stones.

Celebrity guests during the weekend included former Arsenal and England footballer-turned-pundit, Ian Wright, who promoted a new biography. Tony Robinson, perhaps best known for playing Baldrick in *Blackadder* and for presenting archaeology show, *Time Team*, also talked about his autobiography, *No Cunning Plan*. Woody Woodmansey, the late David Bowie's drummer and the last surviving "Spider from Mars", was another big draw.

Historian Stuart Hylton's talk — Reading in 50 Buildings — looked at local landmarks including Reading Prison, The Oracle and Caversham Library and elsewhere there was a slot for "dictionary corner" regular on TV game show *Countdown*, the lexicographer, Susie Dent.

Ryan believes Reading's Year of Culture demonstrates a will to change perceptions of the town: "There can be a tendency to talk Reading down a bit but hopefully the Year of Culture has started to shine a light on all the great things that are going on here," he says.



Above: Laser lights were used for Neon Dance's performance at Reading's South Street Arts Centre. Below: Celebrity autobiographies were launched at the literary festival.

GET ON YOUR DANCING SHOES

Danielle Corbishley, producer at Junction Dance, an organisation set up in 2014 to create opportunities for involvement with all forms of dance in Reading, has found that this is a town where people approach the medium with a lot of enthusiasm.

"There are more than 100 dance schools in Reading covering a wide range of styles and techniques," she explains.

"It's safe to say this is a higher proportion compared to other towns in the UK of a similar size. There are maybe more students studying dance here than anywhere else in the country."

As a response to this, Junction Dance organised Dance Reading, taking place throughout November as part of the Year of Culture. It featured performances from some of the country's biggest companies, workshops for aspiring dancers and opportunities for people interested in taking up a new hobby.

Venues across the town used during the week included Reading Museum, St Bart's Theatre, St Luke's Hall and The Hexagon Theatre. At the latter, nationally acclaimed dance company Balletboyz, performed a brilliantly received show called *Life*.

Diversity was key, says Corbishley, both in the range of different dance styles and opening opportunities for all to get involved, with workshops for disabled people and all parts of the community turning out and getting enthused by dance at events and workshops.

