



Reading offers a real surprise

The historic Berkshire town of Reading, found where the Thames and Kennet rivers meet, is more than a base for going elsewhere.

As a major rail hub Reading does enjoy quick and easy access to London along with other cities favoured by tourists such as Windsor, Bristol, Bath and Oxford.

But while Reading makes an excellent, budget friendly, base for day trips further afield, it also rewards as a short-break destination in its own right.

With the Bayeux Tapestry luring hundreds of thousands to the British Museum during its 'residency' there, Reading Museum has the remarkable British replica on free and permanent display.

And much else besides.

<https://www.visit-reading.com/>

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays traveller





Reading does not disappoint on a short 'city-break'

This Berkshire town has the Thames; a celebration of rural life; the chance to swim and dine in a Victorian lido and Britain's Bayeux Tapestry

By Ashley Gibbins

Ann and I have enjoyed many interesting and enjoyable short breaks to destinations that raise eyebrows when we say where we are going.

It is inevitably where or why?

While not wishing to deride Reading it was the why.

We were however quietly confident that our short break to this Berkshire town would prove well worth it. And we were not disappointed.

What first interested us was the ballyhoo over the arrival of the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum, and reading as a sidebar about a replica of note on permanent display at Reading Museum.

And so, with just one night so two days at our disposal, we were confident of filling our time.

This was most certainly the case.

Getting to Reading

The town is very easy to get to by train and certainly for us coming from London.

There is the choice of the hopping on the Elizabeth Line or taking a 30-minute overground rail service from Paddington.

From Reading, one can get to Windsor in minutes and to Bristol, Bath and Oxford in under an hour.

It is therefore many use Reading as a base for day trips to the Capital or other cities of note.

We had decided to arrive and stay in Reading and, opting for the Elizabeth Line, we arrived mid-morning on our first day and stayed until early evening on the second.

A place to stay

As for our hotel, it was the Malmaison Reading which, I was reliably informed is the world's oldest station hotel.

Being a one-minute stroll from the station, it could not be more convenient and as a Malmaison we were assured of quality throughout (as Ann writes below).

Britain's Bayeux Tapestry

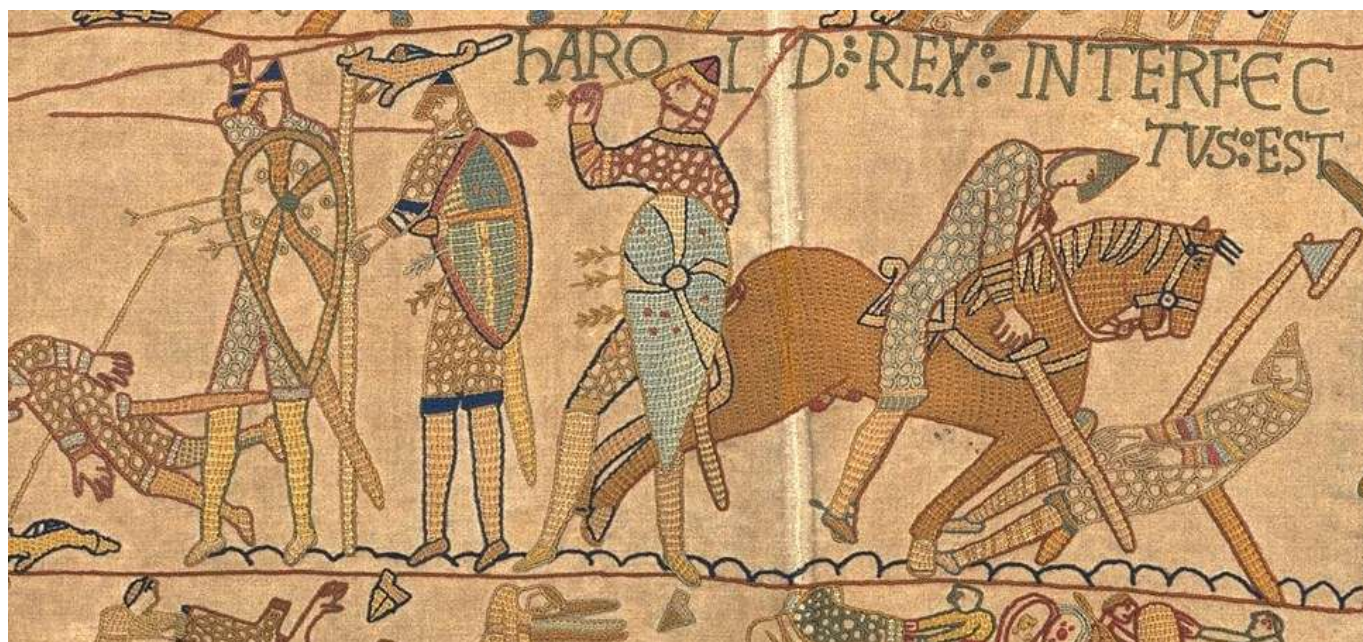
First on the list was Britain's Bayeux Tapestry at Reading Museum before getting a walking tour historic tour of the Abbey Quarter with David West of Walk Reading.

For our second day it was a leisurely 90 minute on the river with Thames Rivercruise, followed by a splendid lunch at the Thames Lido, and finally a visit to the fascinating Museum of English Rural Life.

We left Reading with no regrets whatsoever at our choice.

Almost better than the real thing

There has been an extraordinary hype surrounding the Bayeux Tapestry returning to the UK some one thousand years after it was first created here.



Though in reality an embroidery, rather than a tapestry, it is a 'storyboard' for William, Duke of Normandy's invasion of Britain and his history defining defeat of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

While the Bayeux Tapestry's residency at the British Museum ends in July 2027, a remarkable British version is on free and permanent display in Reading Museum.

A full-size, exact replica of the original was created some 140 years ago, by Elizabeth Wardle and 38 other ladies from the Leek Embroidery Society in Staffordshire.

Elizabeth had visited the Bayeux Tapestry in Normandy, in 1885, and left determined England should have one of its own'.

With 35 other members of her embroidery society, she set about doing just that.

Using full-size, hand-coloured photographs from the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (then the South Kensington Museum), the women spent a year painstakingly hand-stitching the designs using brightly dyed woollen yarns onto a linen backcloth.



It was here Alderman Arthur Hill, a former mayor of the town, was persuaded to buy the ladies version of the tapestry for Reading Museum.

When finished Britain's Bayeux Tapestry was exhibited in Leek and then extensively throughout the UK and Europe, eventually arriving in Reading.

It has been here ever since, and now has its own gallery and expert guides to give due prominence to this genuine work of art.

On our museum visit, Simon Elsbury was on hand to take us through Britain's Bayeux Tapestry, during one of the regular 90-minute guided tours.

Within a couple of minutes, one forgets which tapestry is which as Simon focuses on the events depicted.

Reading Museum itself has galleries displaying archaeological finds from Roman Silchester and medieval Reading Abbey along with contemporary Aldermaston Pottery and the Huntley & Palmers biscuit tins collection.

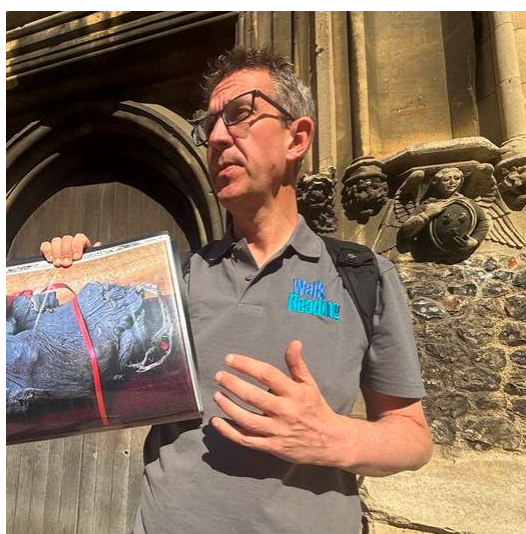
More information :

<https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/bayeux-tapestry>



The Abbey Quarter with Walk Reading

We always look to take a guided walking tour of the towns and cities we visit and here we found Dave West of Walk Reading.



His fascinating *Town Centre Trail* walk started with a brief history of the town before heading into Forbury Gardens and through the Abbey ruins to the Kennet and Avon Canal before heading off to see Create Escape, Reading's Banksy.

The artist painted the mural of a prisoner escaping over the perimeter wall of the one-time Reading Prison.

The typewriter dangling from the rope is a homage to Oscar Wilde who spent just under 18-months 'hard labour' as part of a two-year sentence for 'gross indecency with other male persons'.

Walk Reding offers a range of guided walking tours in and around Reading.



More information :

<https://www.walk-reading.co.uk/>

A leisurely cruise along the river

Thames Rivercruise trips offer any number of ways to get onto the water



James Rodwell



While the Thames at Reading is as attractive as any, the town does not have the scenic river frontage of say Windsor or Maidenhead.

You need to take the short walk across the inner-ring road from the station but do so and one can enjoy a leisurely stroll along the river towpath.

Or board a river cruise offered by Thames Rivercruise, whose fleet has been plying the stretch of the river between Henley and Goring for over 50 years.

It was set up by Tim Deaton in the 1970s and is now run by son Ben.

Operating mainly from Caversham Pier, there is the option of 45 and 90-minute sightseeing cruises along with themed, dining and music cruises on the Alexandra, Caversham Lady, Caversham Princess or Devon Belle.

There are also self-drive electric picnic boats.

We took the leisurely 90-minute sightseeing cruise aboard the Alexandra, with Cap'n James Rodwell at the helm.

It was all one could ask for from time on the water.

The chance to relax as we passed waving rowers and scullers, spotted the birds that make the Thames their home and also admire some of the grand properties with their river frontages, albeit with just a little envy.

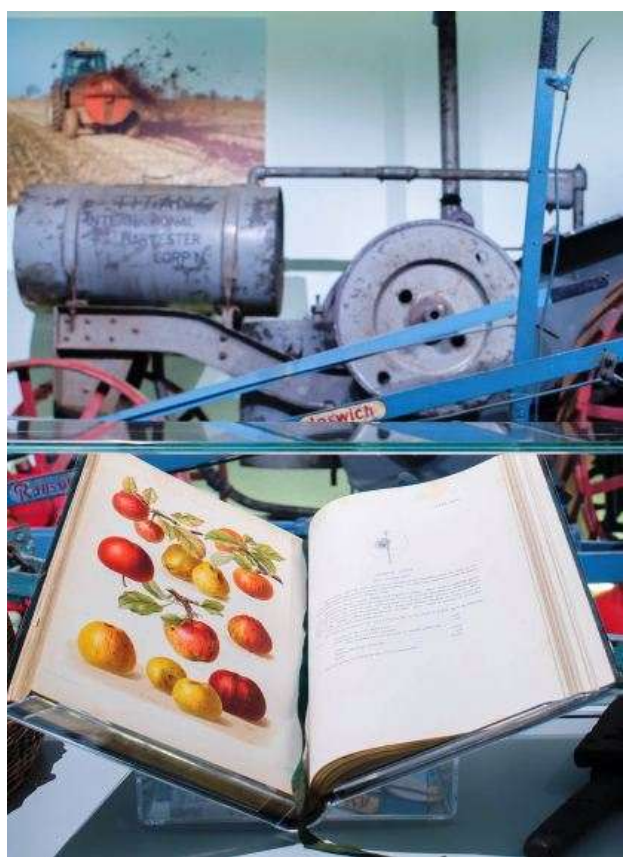
It would also have been good to take a trip on the Devon Belle, the company's pride and joy. A certified 'Little Ship of Dunkirk' it had taken part in Operation Dynamo, which in June 1940 saw hundreds of small boats cross t

he English Channel to rescue many thousands of stranded Allied troops from the beaches of Dunkirk.

Ben and his team have painstakingly restored the Devon Belle to her former glory, to us the chance to enjoy a cruise aboard a boat that has earned her place in history.

More information :

<https://www.thamesrivercruise.co.uk/>



The Museum of English Rural Life

The Museum of English Rural Life charts the changing face of farming and the English countryside.



The MERL, as it is also known, has collections depicting rural life from 1750 to the present day.

There are some 25,000 objects on display including carts, agricultural hand tools, ploughs and farm machinery

There are posters promoting a range of agricultural products, and a shoe range of images depicting the farming community in times gone by and the livestock they tended.

An absolutely fascinating collection free to visit.

More information :

www.merl.reading.ac.uk



The way to preserve our heritage

The Thames Lido is one of those unique places one is enhanced with for the moment one enters the building.

First opened in 1902, as the Ladies Swimming Bath, it is thought to be the UK's oldest surviving Edwardian outdoor municipal pool.

It was designed by Reading Borough Engineer John Bowen without external windows to give the women bathers due privacy.

The 25-metre pool, which was initially filled from the Thames and then with mains water, provided outdoor swimming for just over 70 years.

Lack of funding, and indeed interest in the bracing bathing, led to its closure in 1974.

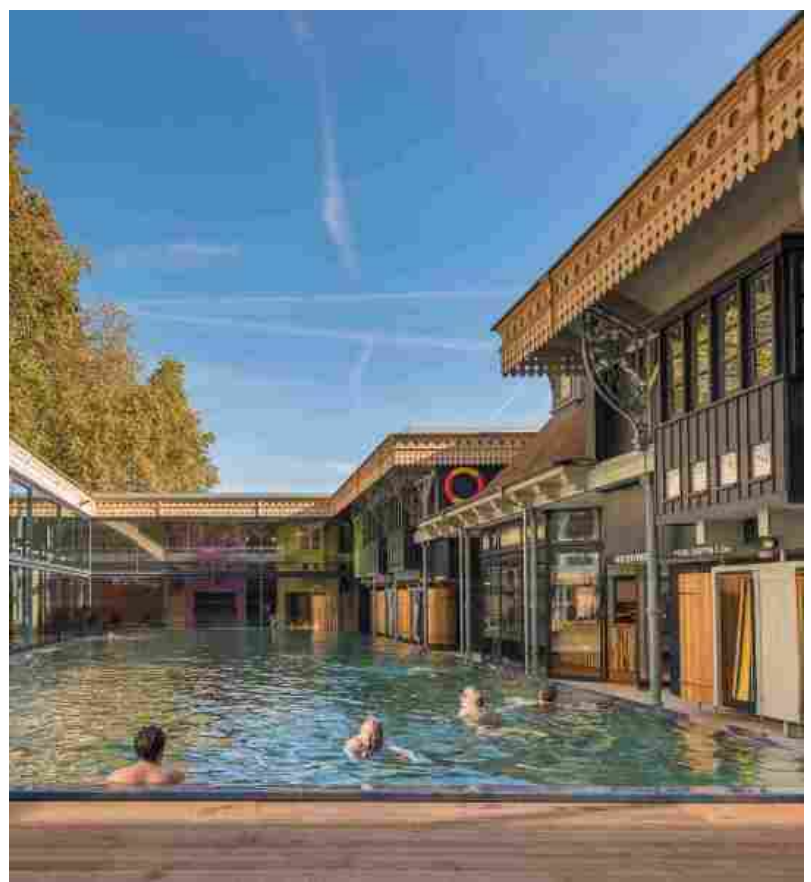
Locals campaigned and succeeded in getting the pool recognised as a Grade II listed building, which saved it from demolition.

Fast forward to 2013 and the pool was purchased from the local council for £1 by Arne Ringner, who also has Bristol's Clifton Lido.

Arne then proceeded to invest over £3.5 million in a four-year restoration project.

The now named Thames Lido reopened in October 2017 as a modern urban spa and restaurant, embracing its historic Edwardian pool and layout.

It is a model example of what can be achieved with compassion and commitment linked to commercial nous and is hugely popular with conservationists and clientele alike.



Dining at the Thames Lido



By Ann Mealor

Dining at the Thames Lido, next to the outdoor pool on a warm sunny summer's day felt just like being abroad.

It was lovely and so relaxing, to sit and have lunch whilst hearing the soft lapping of water as swimmers passed by.

Thames Lido is the restored King's Meadow swimming pool.

It first opened to the public in 1902 as the Ladies Swimming Baths and is believed to be the oldest surviving outdoor municipal pool of the early Edwardian era.

With no windows looking onto the pool itself, it was built to allow women to bathe in privacy.

The baths closed to the public in 1974, and the historic building fell into a poor state of repair.

However, after being beautifully and carefully refurbished, the Grade II listed building reopened in 2017, restored to its former glory.

This stylish and refined Lido is not like the outdoor swimming baths of my youth.

There is no jumping in the 25-metre pool, running, diving or splashing about.

It is all very leisurely and refined, almost Romanesque in the way people come here to socialise, catch up with friends and take to the water, whether its walking, sitting, swimming or just dangling feet in it.

At around 24-26 degrees Celsius, the pool is always warm, whatever the weather, and there are Lido Spa products in every shower cubicle.

After a quick dip there is lunch to look forward to and depending on the occasion maybe a cocktail.

There is a good selection of dishes on offer including light bites and small plates.

Chefs work closely with local suppliers, farmers and fishermen to get the freshest produce for their kitchen. Simple cooking methods are used, including the chargrill and clay oven.

For starters, I chose a refreshing summer salad combo of ripe peach, goats curd, tomatoes and salted almonds and Ashley the warm, plump scallops, roasted in the half shell with garlic butter and herbs.

For mains, I had tagliatelle tossed in a crab butter sauce, topped with flakes of moist Cornish crab, crispy toasted breadcrumbs and chives.

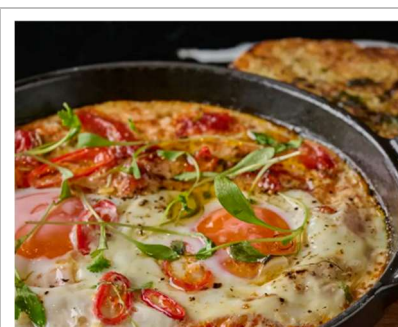
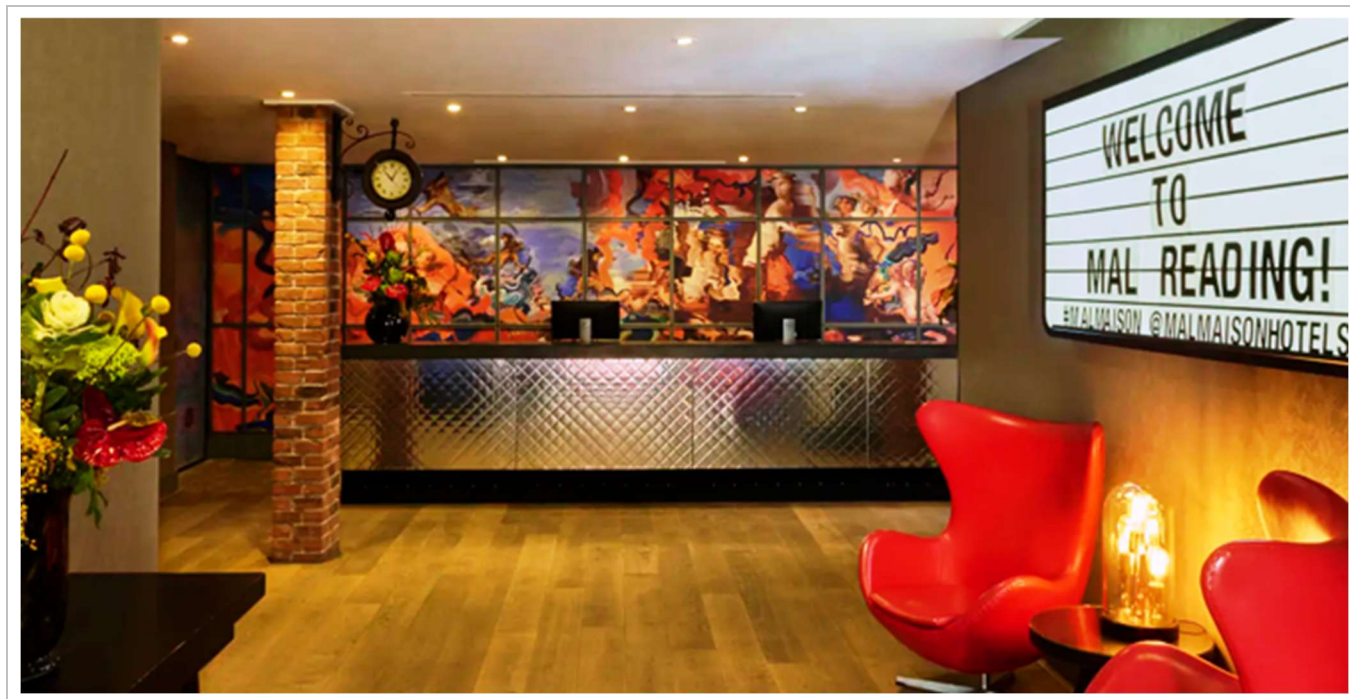
Ashley went for the sweet sole with mussels and soft, white coco de Bretagne beans in a kakavia sauce.

The side of charcoal grilled hispi cabbage with tahini and walnut butter impressed us both and would be a 'must' for next time.

A Rhubarb Spritz (Gin, rhubarb liqueur, elderflower, prosecco and soda) paired perfectly with my meal.

More information :

<https://www.thameslido.com/>



A hotel of character seconds from the station

Malmaison Reading is a chic and stylish hotel with comfort and character in abundance.

By Ann Mealor

Built back in 1844, it holds the accolade of being the world's oldest surviving purpose-built station hotel.

The name Malmaison comes from the Chateau de Malmaison, a country estate near Paris that was once the home of Napoleon Bonaparte and his wife Josephine.

The founders chose the name in 1994 to reflect the stylish, chic French-inspired design of their boutique hotels.

Conveniently situated in the heart of Reading and close to the Elizabeth Line it's ideally placed for visitors to explore the city and all of its cultural and historical attractions.



Our room



Our room was large and stylish with plenty of natural light and decorated in cool, calming greys with splashes of burnt orange bringing warmth and colour.

An affective collage of what looked like faded and torn magazine front pages featuring stars from the past covered the wall behind the bed. Slippers and robes were provided as well as a hospitality tray with tea, coffee and biscuits.

High quality and sumptuously scented *Figleaf* toiletries from the beautiful Isle of Arran were in the bathroom.

I particularly liked the lavender and spearmint calming mist left by the bed for a sweet, scented slumber.

Dining at the Malmaison



Before going into dinner, we sat in the cozy candlelit bar and studied the menu whilst sipping a well-made spicy Margarita, one of our favourite cocktails, and nibbling on moorish roasted corn kernels.

The Chez Mal Brasserie offers a tempting selection of British fusion dishes so choosing what to eat was difficult as everything sounded so good.

The serving team were very friendly and attentive and helped us with our choices.

Finally, for starters we decided on the crispy coconut Argentinian red prawns with a tropical mango salsa, lime and chilli jam and the roasted soft peaches with mozzarella, green beans and crunchy toasted almonds. We enjoyed them both.

For my main dish, I had a perfectly cooked tender fillet steak, done medium well yet still succulent, with a peppercorn sauce, roasted onion and a green salad.

Ashley went for the delicately flavoured pan-fried chalk stream trout in a prawn bisque with crispy clams, salty samphire and exceptional triple cooked fries.

To accompany our meal, we picked The Sommelier's wine choice, a fine Australian white Fiano Luccio, by Pikes, from the Clare Valley.

We ended our evening on a sweet note with a super sticky toffee pudding bathed in a warm, decadent sauce and vanilla ice cream and a very prettily presented strawberry cheesecake with a vanilla crumb and fresh strawberries.

Breakfast

Breakfast had everything needed to fuel us for a day of sightseeing.

There was a small buffet of fresh fruit – the pineapple was particularly sweet and juicy - bread, cereals, pastries, yoghurts and a most impressive, homemade honey, nut clustered granola.

There was plenty of tasty items on the hot menu too. I had poached eggs with smoked salmon and Ashley the eggs with avocado.

If we hadn't eaten so much the night before, we would have tried the full English and veggie breakfasts, which came recommended.

My latte was very good too – nice and hot without too much foam.

Before our food arrived, we enjoyed looking at the vintage railway ads from the 40s, 50s and 60s picturing all the romantic and glamorous destinations that could be reached by train.

More information :

<https://www.malmaison.com/locations/reading>



AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance



AllWays traveller is the consumer travel magazine from the International Travel Writers, providing independent travellers with views of the world from Alliance travel journalists.

www.allwaystraveller.com



The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

www.itwalliance.com



Ann Meador is a professional travel writer and photographer and Managing Editor of *AllWays Traveller*



Ashley Gibbins is a professional travel writer and photographer and Managing Director of the International Travel Writers Alliance.