

Connor McNeill  
**Conservation Adviser**  
Direct line 020 8747 5893  
connor@victoriansociety.org.uk

---

**THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY**  
The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

[dcmslordsminister@dcms.gov.uk](mailto:dcmslordsminister@dcms.gov.uk)  
[damian.hinds.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:damian.hinds.mp@parliament.uk)

Your reference: Reading Gaol (former  
HMP Reading)  
Our reference: n/a  
5<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Dear Lord Parkinson and Minister of State for Justice,

**RE: Reading Gaol (former HMP Reading)**

The Victorian Society understands that a sale has been agreed for the redevelopment of Reading Gaol, following the refusal of Reading Borough Council's own offer for the building. I am writing to you both as this matter raises cross departmental matters.

Reading Gaol is a significant building in many ways, designed by *Sir George Gilbert Scott* and *William Boynton Moffatt* in 1842-4, it represents a particularly fine and interesting example of a 19<sup>th</sup> century prison complex. The site also has well-known historical significance due to the incarceration of Oscar Wilde at the gaol in 1895-7 and his penning of 'the Ballad of Reading Gaol' during this time.

The Save Reading Gaol campaign, formed in 2019, has advocated for the development of the building as a community and arts hub. This would allow the building to be opened to the public, make a strong cultural contribution to the town, and this historic site would be accessible to all. None of which would be guaranteed by the mooted residential redevelopment.

HM Treasury's [Supplementary guidance to the Green Book on the valuation of public sector assets](#) for disposal requires an assessment of 'any other social cost and benefits that may arise due to disposal'. At 1.4 this notes that 'Public sector assessment of value is based upon the interests of society as a whole and is not an assessment of value to the public sector alone'.

We urge you to give more weight to the public benefits that would arise from opening this important building, one of the key physical places in the UK's queer history, to the public. The Gaol also potentially contains the remains of Henry I from when the site formed part of the adjoining abbey. The site has the potential to generate significant public benefits and interest which in turn will stimulate the visitor economy of Reading providing economic stimulus in the long term. Selling the Gaol for private development, which would most likely see conversion to flats, would inevitably mean more harmful change for this nationally important listed building than converting to community use. Private development of the site also carries a significant risk of harming the setting of

**Patron**  
HRH The Duke of Gloucester KG, GCVO  
**President**  
Griffiths Jones  
**Chair**  
Professor Hilary Grainger

**Vice Presidents**  
Sir David Cannadine  
The Lord Howarth of Newport CBE  
Sir Simon Jenkins

1 Priory Gardens, London W4 1TT  
Telephone 020 8994 1019  
admin@victoriansociety.org.uk  
victoriansociety.org.uk

Reading Abbey. This scheduled monument is an excellent example of a medieval monastic complex, one of few such sites in Berkshire.

The area around the Gaol has seen intensive development in recent years so whilst any possible housing provision would provide a wider public benefit it would be very minor compared to what would be lost from ending the opportunity for public access and the potential development of a visitor attraction.

We urge the Ministry of Justice to reconsider Reading Borough Council's offer for the building and help facilitate a future for this unique building that has strong local support and will make a strong contribution to Reading town and the wider area as well as demonstrating the Government's commitment to securing the best outcomes for heritage within its portfolio.

Yours sincerely,

Connor McNeill

**Conservation Adviser**