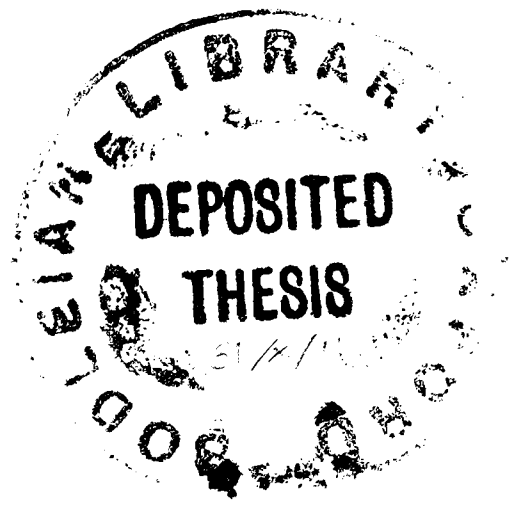
Department for Continuing Education
University of Oxford

Tudor Abingdon:
the experience of change and renewal in a sixteenth century town

Janey Cumber
Kellogg College



Thesis submitted
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in English Local History
October 2010

Tudor Abingdon:
the experience of change and renewal in a sixteenth century town

Janey Cumber, Kellogg College
Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Local History,
Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford, Trinity Term 2010

Short Abstract

This thesis is an early modern urban study that focuses both on national trends and events but also acknowledges the distinctive nature of the individual town. It takes a holistic approach to economic, administrative and socio-cultural changes and developments in a small but significant Berkshire town. The years after the dissolution of Abingdon abbey in 1538 were a critical time of losses, problems and opportunities for Abingdon. In the light of the town's successful development later in the century how serious were the challenges that it faced and what factors contributed to its survival? After a historiographical introduction and discussion of sources, two chapters investigate the town's medieval development under monastic lordship. The central chapters explore different aspects of change in Abingdon during the reformation period. In practical administrative terms the town's response was opportunistic and positive, due to a happy convergence of government policy and the continuity of local elite leadership. Economic and social strength and diversity gave stability, and a detailed rental survey demonstrates how the acquisition of public and private property benefited the town's elite. However, cultural and religious changes had some ill effects. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss Abingdon's successful administrative, economic and social development under the new institutions of the borough and Christ's Hospital established in the 1550s. Experienced leading men were supported by a thriving middling group of tradesmen. A brief discussion about the relationship between civic culture, civil discipline and puritanism later in the 1500s follows. The thesis concludes that Abingdon's resilience and survival was based on its diversified economic development and on social and cultural continuities. Abingdon's richly documented experience of reformation change demonstrates the need for continuing research into individual towns and offers an important contribution to our understanding of the age of reformation in English urban history.

Tudor Abingdon:
the experience of change and renewal in a sixteenth century town

Janey Cumber, Kellogg College

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Local History, Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford
Trinity Term 2010

Long Abstract

This thesis is the study of change and renewal in Abingdon during the sixteenth century. The years that followed the dissolution of Abingdon abbey in 1538 were a critical time of losses, problems and opportunities for the small but significant Berkshire town. The main focus of the study is to explore different aspects of change in Abingdon during the reformation period, and to assess how the watershed events of the dissolutions of the town's intercessory institutions affected the people of Abingdon. In the light of the town's successful development in the later sixteenth century how serious were the challenges it faced and what factors contributed to its survival?

The study of the early modern town has been transformed by the development of urban history since the 1970s. Interpretation and methodology have evolved within the context of new topical and thematic approaches. However, there is still a need for the detailed investigation of individual communities. Previously research concentrated on large nationally important towns, but more recently the value of detailed investigations of smaller towns has become apparent, particularly in terms of the development of wider historical theories. This thesis aims to be a modern sixteenth century town study that focuses not only on national trends and events that expose a community to dynamic change, but also acknowledges the distinctive nature of the individual town. The intention is to show the value of a holistic approach to

economic, administrative and socio-cultural changes and developments in a small provincial town at a time of flux.

The first chapter is a general historiographical introduction and discussion of sources for sixteenth century Abingdon. Chapters 2 and 3 investigate the development of the town prior to the dissolution. Abingdon was well established by the end of the middle ages as a major town in Berkshire and the main market town in north Berkshire. It was distinctive because of the status of the Benedictine abbey of Abingdon, and also because of its geographical position on the river Thames and on important roads, less than 50 miles from London. An understanding of the development of the medieval town and the changing interaction between the abbey and the townspeople is crucial to the assessment of sixteenth century change and renewal. The fifteenth century fraternity combined a corporate identity with social exclusivity, and established an elite that abandoned earlier patterns of conflict and litigation between town and abbey in favour of a working relationship. This process enhanced the status of the town's leadership, and, whether intentionally or not, inhibited the collaborative nature of the town community.

Early modern towns have generally been viewed as vulnerable societies, prone to suffer from long- or short-term problems due to social and economic changes, although historians have disagreed about the chronology and extent of the crisis or crises. A detailed review of the economic, social and administrative structure of early sixteenth century Abingdon reveals no signs of decline or decay. Abingdon's economy and society flourished independently of the abbey in the early sixteenth century. Its leaders had developed quasi-civic roles based on their economic and

social status, and they were potentially equipped for a transition to local autonomous government. Meanwhile there remained a structural imbalance between informal and formal power holding that showed little sign of resolution. The abbey remained significantly involved in every aspect of town life, and its national profile continued to define the identity of the town.

The dissolution period in Abingdon provided a dramatic finale to the six hundred year long monastic era in the town's history. The destruction of the abbey in 1538 and the subsequent dissolution of the town's fraternity in 1547-8 were triggers for change. The central chapters of the thesis discuss different aspects, both positive and negative, of the immediate post-dissolution period. Despite the strengths of Abingdon's economic and social structure, the hiatus that the dissolution brought in terms of administration, property ownership, employment and status was a potent threat to the town's stability. The secular economy and society of the town was sufficiently developed and independent to mitigate the discontinuity of the dissolution period, but the townsmen faced an unexpected scenario of problems and challenges.

Although the dissolutions were indeed both remarkably disruptive events, the administration under the Court of Augmentations maintained order and demonstrated a degree of continuity. Locally known and experienced appointees, John and Oliver Wellesbourne and Thomas Denton, ran the town much as it had been run before. Sir John Mason (an Abingdon-born career politician) intervened to promote the establishment of Christ's Hospital to replace the dissolved fraternity in 1553 and the incorporation of the borough in 1556. The emergence of the borough of Abingdon, eighteen years after the dissolution of the abbey, was an affirmation of the

community's abilities to run its own affairs in a relatively independent manner. The emergence of the new institutions resulted from a happy convergence of government policy and local ambition. The town's leading businessmen had most to gain from administrative reconstruction, and became a ruling class of governors and burgesses.

The view that the early modern town was inherently unstable has provided the context for negative historical judgements about the role of the reformation as a stress-factor in the typical town. The argument that the dissolution of a major religious house in a town like Abingdon had grave economic consequences has been long accepted. However, evidence shows that poverty and decay was at a containable level in post-dissolution Abingdon, and was not due to administrative neglect or economic decline. Abingdon was sustained by the strength and diversity of its economic life as a marketing, manufacturing, distributive, agricultural, hospitality and thoroughfare centre. A large group of the better off 'middling sort' supported a small elite group of gentry and merchants. However, this was undoubtedly a difficult period of political and administrative limbo for the town's leaders, despite the efficiency of the interim stewards of the town. Economic survival probably occupied the leading businessmen of the town rather than development, and their prime objectives were to prevent and manage social and economic problems in order to safeguard their leading role in the political reconstruction of the town.

The analysis of the Amyce survey, a detailed rental survey made before the borough's incorporation, is central to our understanding of the impact of the dissolutions, and confirms that the structural elements of the lay society of post-reformation Abingdon were very little affected by the dissolutions. The lively commercial life of an entrepôt

brought an unusual degree of sophistication to the society of this relatively small town. The strength of the community lay with its leading businessmen, who were committed to the economic development of the town on which their own standing depended. They had the most to gain from the acquisition of property that accompanied the transfer of authority, both in terms of the grants to Christ's Hospital and to the borough, and as individuals. Those men who became office-holders in the borough and the hospital also became responsible for large institutional property holdings. Important shifts in town society resulted when many townsmen effectively became the tenants, either institutionally or in some cases privately, of members of the town elite. The hospital and borough's new holdings bear a strong similarity to those of the fraternity and the abbey, but an increase in private freeholds and purchases transformed the property-holding landscape of the town. In this respect the post-dissolution period was one of unusual innovation and opportunity that worked in the favour of the town's elite on both an institutional and a private level.

In terms of practical administrative, economic and social developments it can be readily demonstrated that Abingdon's response to change showed no signs of crisis, but was opportunistic and positive. However, religious and cultural changes were an integral part of all the other challenges that faced towns during the reformation period. Historians have interpreted the dissolution period as a shocking series of losses, which had the potential to bring emotional and psychological instability to communities. Little is known about how the people of Abingdon experienced religious and cultural change after 1538. There is limited evidence of some retention of traditional links and practices, and none at all of receptivity to new religious ideas. There is no evidence of dissent, but neither is there proof that the town community wanted any

aspect of religious change, even in terms of the dissolution of the abbey. It is impossible that the destruction of traditional institutions, practices and beliefs caused no damage but it seems likely that in Abingdon, as was the case elsewhere, pragmatic self-interest prevailed. The continuity of pastoral care provided by some of the key abbey personnel may have prevented disruption.

Chapters 8 and 9 discuss different aspects of Abingdon's renewal and development in the post-incorporation period. Historians have seen the reformation period as a critical time for urban organisational development. Abingdon's ruling elite had acquired new local property and resources, thus completing a process whereby they became local agents of government. Although subject to external controls, jurisdiction and interference, county figures had limited influence, partly due to the protective role of Abingdon's High Steward, Sir John Mason, who was succeeded by the Earl of Leicester. Through their new roles in government, Abingdon's leading men would have to organise and, to an extent, control their fellow townspeople. The incorporations gave them the opportunity to lay down solid foundations for a future of settled prosperity. Both borough and hospital needed to establish independent, organised and authoritative government, and to improve public and private property while at the same time balancing the civic books. The immediate priority of Abingdon's elite was the financial and organisational management that would instil business confidence in the town.

Abingdon had faced an extremely sharp break from its past, resulting in a void in terms of continuity of cultural practice, and a need to invent a new identity for the town. Historians have viewed the development of post-reformation civic culture as a

deliberate policy adopted by the elite to replace religious focus with political and secular focus. In the decades that followed incorporation the town's leaders put in place policies that prioritised social stability, economic security and civic values. These were innovatory for Abingdon, but harked back to the medieval traditions of older and larger boroughs. The town's leading men also looked backwards in terms of the continuity of the role held by the hospital in town government. Oligarchic institutions and a hierarchical society, both dominated by men of business, had been dominant features of pre-reformation Abingdon, and remained so after 1556.

The establishment of town government in local institutional hands is only half the story of Abingdon's post-reformation recovery. It is demonstrable that Abingdon's development owed as much to economic expansion and social stability as it did to incorporated government. The town benefited from the development of long-distance trade, especially to London. This was associated with the expansion of its distributive, retailing and hospitality trades, and with commercial agriculture, particularly the growth of malt production and trading. The symbiotic relationship between economic, social and governmental factors was closely related to the restoration of the town's image and the interests of the town's leading men. With new formal powers they could promote the town's interests in the outside world and safeguard control and stability in the town through measures that included improvements in welfare, housing and facilities.

In conclusion, a favourable conjunction of circumstances protected Abingdon from the worst effects of reformation change. A stable core of entrepreneurial families operating within a lively society and economy retained the authority to foster political

stabilisation. The status of the first generation of leaders of the incorporated town was linked as much to their roles in the pre-reformation society and economy as it was to the new offices they held. New administrative, social and economic opportunities in the 1550s had progressively set them further apart from their fellow townsmen, a trend that was reinforced by the oligarchic nature of the two institutions that governed the town. The available evidence for the early years of autonomous institutional government reveals a competently led community that managed social and economic change.

In the longer term there were new challenges to the town's stability. There is evidence of the growth of dissent among the elite and of the imposition of political, social and cultural restrictive measures that took place against a background of the advance of puritan ideas. The encouragement of discipline and order suited the governors of towns, and it is difficult to know whether the advance of puritanism created a demand for civil discipline or was a useful tool in its support. By the 1570s there is evidence that the town's steady move towards puritanism was integrated with town government.

It has been suggested that the ruling elite took a two-pronged approach towards the promotion of a civic culture that supported their authority. As well as controlling beliefs and behaviour, they also tried to encourage a new and selectively constructed civic memory that was favourable to their interests. In considering how the town's leaders related to the townspeople the importance of a shared past history should not be underestimated, particularly the memory of the past importance of the fraternity. In the eyes of townsmen their leading families had qualified to be chosen for civic

positions because of their earlier quasi-civic roles in the town. Past history may have protected the town's leadership from opposition, and acted as a strong force for unity and stability in late sixteenth century Abingdon. The hospital was an ever-present reminder of a sense of urban consciousness that originated in the efforts of past generations to act independently of the abbey.

This thesis concludes that the richly documented experience of a period of critical change in this small town adds to our understanding of a range of issues of note to urban historians. Its resilience to the variety of threats caused by reformation change is a key piece of evidence in the long-term debate about decline and growth in sixteenth century English towns. Over the second half of the sixteenth century Abingdon had developed as a recognizably effective and functional independent community. The factors that both distinguished and favoured the town included its economic and social diversity and stability, and the presence of a thriving middling group of tradesmen and craftsmen. The continuity provided by former members of the fraternity, by men who had worked for the abbey and by the interest of Sir John Mason helped the lay leadership to weather the problems caused by the dissolution. The achievement of self-government was as important to the ordinary townspeople as to the civic elite, and in general the events of the dissolution worked to the advantage of the town. The analysis of the town's survival, giving equal emphasis to political, economic, social and cultural change, demonstrates the need for ongoing and open-minded research into the development of individual towns, and offers an important contribution to our understanding of the age of reformation in English urban history.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr. Ian Archer and Dr. Adrienne Rosen, for their guidance, patience, kindness and help during the preparation of this thesis. I would also like to thank the librarians and archivists who have assisted me, in particular Mrs. Jackie Smith, Abingdon Borough Archivist, and the late Nigel Hammond, formerly archivist of Christ's Hospital, Abingdon. Thanks are due to the Master and Governors of Christ's Hospital and to their Clerk, Mr. Chris Nutman, for allowing me the privilege of working on some of the documents in their archive, and giving me permission to use the image of 'The Bridgebuilders'.

My development as a local historian was fostered by teaching staff at the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education: these include Chris Day, Dr. Kate Tiller, Dr. Ros Faith, the late Dr. Margaret Gelling, Joan Dils, and in particular Dr. Adrienne Rosen, who also supervised my M.St. dissertation. Dr. Manfred Brod, Dr. Adrian Ailes and Joan Dils have also kindly helped with references. I am grateful to them all, as well as to fellow students and to the fellows and staff of Kellogg College, for their continuing friendly support and interest.

I am thankful for the encouragement I have received from my family, from friends, from local historians in Marcham and Abingdon, and in particular from my children William, Ellen and Sophie. Above all I thank my husband Will who has consistently allowed me to prioritise my academic work over my everyday work, and acknowledge that without his care and support this thesis could never have been completed.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements		i
Table of Contents		ii
Abbreviations and Conventions		iv
Chapter 1	Introduction: historiography and sources	1
	A general historiography of the Early Modern English Town	2
	The single town study and the study of smaller towns	17
	Sixteenth century Abingdon	20
	Sources for sixteenth century Abingdon	25
Chapter 2	Medieval Abingdon: the abbey and the town	33
	The development of the medieval town	37
	Social and administrative change in the later medieval town	47
	Conclusion	61
Chapter 3	Abingdon in the early sixteenth century	63
	Abingdon's economy in the early sixteenth century	63
	Wealth and society in early sixteenth century Abingdon	75
	Abbey and town in the early sixteenth century	86
	Conclusion	101
Chapter 4	The dissolution period: the transfer of administration 1538-56	103
	The dissolution of Abingdon abbey	105
	The dissolution of the chantries and the incorporations of the 1550s	119
	Conclusion	131
Chapter 5	The economic consequences of the dissolutions 1538-56	133
	Employment and population	138
	Wealth or decay?	147
	Conclusion	160
Chapter 6	Property-holding and social structure after the dissolutions 1538-56	163
	Post-dissolution society	173
	Conclusion	187
Chapter 7	Religious and cultural change 1538-56	190
	The dissolution era in Abingdon: the impact of religious and cultural change	195
	The community's response to change	207
	Conclusion	213

Chapter 8	Renewal and development: incorporated government and civic culture after 1556	215
	The development of administration and town finances	218
	The development of civic culture	229
	Conclusion	249
Chapter 9	Renewal and development: economy and society after 1556	251
	Economic development	252
	Social development	274
	Conclusion	
Chapter 10	Conclusion	288
Appendix 1	Population trends in sixteenth century Abingdon	310
Appendix 2	Payments to Abingdon Abbey employees 1533-4	313
Appendix 3	Leading Abingdon townsmen 1548-1600	314
Appendix 4	Abingdon occupations 1525-1600	317
Bibliography		320

List of Figures

Fig. 1	Map: Abingdon Area	34
Fig. 2	Map: Abingdon in the sixteenth century	43
Fig. 3	Photograph: the abbey gateway	44
Fig. 4	Photograph: the market house	44
Fig. 5	Photograph: St. Helen's Church	56
Fig. 6	Photograph: the New Almshouse	56
Fig. 7	Chart: Abingdon properties in 1538	97
Fig. 8	Chart: Distribution of properties in Abingdon's main streets before the dissolution	98
Fig. 9	Chart: St. Helen's Abingdon: burials in peak plague months 1544-6	146
Fig. 10	Chart: Occupational structure of Abingdon 1525-1600	255
Fig. 11	Chart: Numbers in different occupational categories in Abingdon 1525-1600	256
Fig. 12	Chart: Recorded transactions between Abingdon men and tradesmen in other urban centres 1530s-1610s	265
Fig. 13	Chart: Abingdon families and their connections with other urban centres: a comparison between known family connections and known trading connections 1530-1610	278
Fig. 14	Photograph: 'The Bridgebuilders', Christ's Hospital Hall	303
Fig. 15	Chart: St. Helen's baptisms and burials 1539-1600	311
Fig. 16	Chart: Population of St. Helen's parish 1541-1600	312

List of Tables

Table 1	Wealth of Abingdon 1524	78
Table 2	Wealth of Abingdon 1540	151
Table 3	Wealth of Abingdon 1543	152
Table 4	Known townsmen who purchased tenements 1538-54	178-79
Table 5	Property interests in the Bury and elsewhere: the first men to hold office in Christ's Hospital and the Borough	181
Table 6	Amyce Survey: Rentals of 26s 8d and over	184
Table 7	Businesses in the Bury 1554	186
Table 8	Abingdon wills 1538-60: scribes and categories	208
Table 9	Abingdon inventories totalling £50 and over taken between 1550-1600	259
Table 10	Leading Abingdon townsmen 1548-1600	314-15

Abbreviations and Conventions

ABA	Abingdon Borough Archive
Ag.HEW	*Agricultural History of England and Wales*
BRO	Berkshire Record Office
CHA	Christ's Hospital Archive
Challenor	Challenor, B., (ed.), *Selections from the Municipal Chronicles of the Borough of Abingdon 1555-1897* (Abingdon, 1898)
CPR	Calendar of Patent Rolls
CUH	*Cambridge Urban History*
EHR	*English Historical Review*
Ec.HR	*Economic History Review*
HMSO	Her/His Majesty's Stationery Office
LP	*Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
OHS	Oxford Historical Society
ORS	Oxfordshire Record Society
RHS	Royal Historical Society
SPO	State Papers Online
TNA	The National Archives
VCH	*Victoria County History*

Dates: the year starts on 1 January unless indicated otherwise.

Spellings: have been modernised where appropriate.

Wills: Dates cited for PCC wills under the heading TNA PROB 11 record the date probate was granted. Dates cited for wills, inventories and administrations relating to the Archdeaconry Court of Berkshire under the heading BRO record the date the relevant document was written.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Historiography and Sources

This thesis is the study of change and renewal in Abingdon during the sixteenth century. This was a critical time of losses, problems and opportunities for the small but significant urban centre that had been developed during the middle ages by its monastic owners. This study will explore different aspects of change in Abingdon during the reformation period, and argue that among the factors that both distinguished and favoured the town during this period were its economic and social stability, and the resilience of its lay leadership in the face of the problems caused by the dissolution.

The study of an individual early modern town has been transformed by the development of urban history over the last fifty years. Interpretation and methodology have evolved within the context of new approaches to the history of the sixteenth century in England and beyond. The first part of this chapter presents a general historiographical review, introducing concepts, themes, and debates that are important to the research of early modern urban history today. This is followed by a general discussion of the value of the single-town case-study and the relevance of studies of smaller towns. A third section discusses the contribution of a detailed study of a town like Abingdon to the historiography, and is followed by a survey of secondary and primary sources for Abingdon and its region.

A general historiography of the Early Modern English Town

> Urban history supplies a cross-section through much of the history of any period with which it is concerned.[1]

Urban history has its origins in the early town histories that were originally the province of antiquarianism. Until the second half of the twentieth century urban history had an institutional and political focus, usually concentrating on boroughs and their municipal archives. Such studies generally dealt with a long time period and often reflected local class and civic interests. Alan Dyer in his introduction to *The City of Worcester in the Sixteenth Century*, published in 1973, viewed past urban history as largely 'a study of local government rather than of the local community'. Despite their reputation for localism and narrow-mindedness, these early town historians were responsible for preserving and in many cases publishing the documents that provided a foundation for the work of modern urban historians.

W.G. Hoskins was the prime mover in the transformation of local history studies into a serious academic subject. His study of industry and trade in Exeter was one of only a few scholarly studies of early modern towns produced before the second world war.[2] His work created a 'distinctive alliance' between early modern local and urban history which was to have a strong influence on post-war research into towns.[3] Hoskins himself was influenced by the development of social history in the early twentieth century, with its emphasis on the lives of ordinary people. The 'new local history' represented 'a dramatic widening' of the scope of local history, with an interdisciplinarity and democratisation that followed the example of the Annales

---

[1] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns 1400-1640* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1995), p. 1.
[2] W. G. Hoskins, *Industry, Trade and People in Exeter 1688-1800* (Manchester, 1935); Hoskins' publications include town, village and county based histories, as well as more general works about local history and landscape.
[3] J. Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1990), p. 1.

school in France.[4] Alan Everitt's work on market towns emphasized the need to place towns in a local context. At the same time Peter Laslett's use of statistical analysis to establish basic demographic facts about communities, along with the subsequent work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, transformed the treatment of source material.[5]

MacCaffrey's pioneering study of Exeter was the first of a number of post-war studies of individual towns that focussed on larger well-documented towns of national or provincial importance, such as York, Winchester, Colchester and Coventry.[6] Alan Dyer's book on Tudor Worcester was an innovative early modern urban study that dealt with 'the functioning of the urban community in all its aspects', using a wide range of sources.[7] Dyer emphasized the importance of population growth and the structure of the urban economy. He also examined the social and political dimension (with a major focus on the urban elite), religious and cultural change, as well as the county context, communications and topography. The corporation archives remained a major source, but he also used taxation and legal records, parish registers, probate records and will registers. Charles Phythian-Adams' work on Coventry exemplifies a methodological and synthesized approach to an urban study, but with a greater emphasis on how major historical themes and events related to the life of the town. Phythian-Adams set Coventry in the context of an 'urban panorama', and set out to

---

[4] K. Tiller, *English Local History: the State of the Art* (University of Cambridge Board of C.E., Occasional Paper No. 1, 1998), pp. 1-3.

[5] A.M. Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Ag.HEW*, IV (Cambridge, 1967), 467-589; P. Laslett, *The World we have Lost* (New York, 1965).

[6] D.M. Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979); A. Rosen, 'Economic and Social Aspects of Winchester 1520-1670' (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1975); W.T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter 1540-1640: the Growth of an English County Town* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958); R.H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester 1300-1525* (Cambridge, 1986); C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979).

[7] A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester in the Sixteenth Century* (Leicester, 1973), p. 12.

use available data to reconstruct the town in the early sixteenth century, when the collapse of its textile industry was causing social and economic decline.

In the 1970s early modern urban history is said to have 'come of age' with the publication of a range of new work.[8] According to Dyos in 1975, 'the day of the individually posed idiosyncratic study of a town that has no particular analytical purpose or significance is probably on the wane'.[9] New ideas recognized the need for a more generalized and 'a more rigorously comparative and thematic approach', in a context that has also been seen as the localisation of national history.[10] The Hoskins local history approach had been transformed by the influence of political, economic and demographic historians and by historical geographers and social anthropologists, both British and Continental. The concept of urban history in general as an area of scholarly enquiry was in a developmental stage, and conceptual and definitional questions about the early modern town were at the heart of an agenda for research.

One early question was fundamental: is the town an acceptable unit for study? Phythian-Adams summarised the need for rigorous thought about the boundaries of societies: 'historians of societies should actually worry at what they are doing conceptually'.[11] Historians have habitually defined counties, towns and villages according to institutional boundaries: the concept of the county as a unit for study,

---

[8] Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town,* p. 1.
[9] H.J. Dyos, 'Editorial', *Urban History Yearbook,* I (Leicester, 1974), p. 3.
[10] P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), 'Introduction', *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (Basingstoke, 1998); P. Clark (ed.), 'Introduction' *CUH,* II (2000), 18. Two important collections of essays are A.M. Everitt (ed.), *Perspectives in English Urban History* (London, 1973), and P. Abrams and E.A. Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1978). For a review of the literature background see Clark ibid, pp. 16-22, also see Barry (ed.) 'Introduction' *The Tudor and Stuart Town,* pp. 1-34 for an earlier analysis. For an overview see R. Rodger and R. Sweet, 'The changing nature of urban history' in 'The City' (Spring, 2008), http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/City/articles/sweet.htm (accessed 4 January 2010).
[11] C. Phythian-Adams (ed.), 'Introduction: an agenda for English local history', *Societies, Cultures and Kinship 1580-1850: Cultural Provinces in English Local History* (Leicester, 1993), p. xiii.

broken down into smaller units of parishes and boroughs, had been long-established by the work of the *Victoria County History,* which was founded in 1899. Although historians agree that such boundaries are often artificial, it seems inevitable that research will continue to respond to the archives collected by administrative structures of counties, but also of archdeaconries, boroughs, parishes, schools, charities and city livery companies. Beat Kümin justified his chosen field of enquiry, the community of the parish, as follows: a 'common-sense acknowledgement of the existence of a geographically defined religious and social unit with certain collective responsibilities and the capability to act, sue, and be represented as a quasi-corporate body'.[12] The success of a study will depend on whether there is demonstrable political, economic and social cohesion in the area studied. Diarmaid MacCulloch suggested that the county unit of Suffolk developed a valid sense of identity, which he argued came into its own through its administration, when leading men worked together to govern the county in the late sixteenth century. However, most historians would probably now agree that shared identity in a county operated largely at a higher social level, and county boundaries 'bedevil' their understanding of local communities.[13] In general, investigations of more clearly cohesive and flexible regions and sub-regions have largely replaced county-based studies; modern *Victoria County History* volumes cover relatively small and easily-defined areas within counties.[14] Historians continue to study towns as cohesive administrative units, but with added flexibility, shifting

---

[12] B. Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 2.

[13] D. MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors: Politics and Religion in an English County 1500-1600* (Oxford, 1986) p. 2. A.M. Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-60* (Leicester, 1966) was a successful earlier county study. B. Short, 'The precarious rise of regional history in England and Wales', seminar paper delivered 5 March 2002 in Oxford.

[14] *VCH, Oxon,* XVI, due to be published by 2011, will concentrate on the Henley area, in the context of the Chiltern region and on the town's links with London.

between the study of a town as a community in isolation, in its local, regional and county setting, and in comparison to other towns elsewhere.[15]

Debate was initially focussed on two main questions: firstly how could the urban nature of a community be identified? Efforts to define what makes towns different from other communities were summarized by Peter Clark and Paul Slack. Urban characteristics should include all or at least some of the following: a concentration of population (not necessarily large), a specialist economic function (this would include a market), a complex social structure (involving a significant range of non-agrarian occupations), political development and a distinctive regional influence.[16] There was general agreement that the urban economy was 'the most important force which made towns distinct societies', and economic data lent itself to analysis for comparative purposes.[17] Hoskins had already produced rankings of provincial towns at various dates, and an urban hierarchy was formulated through the identification and classification of towns in terms of size (of population), occupational structure and economic and social function.[18] While London was clearly in a league of its own, the largest pre-modern towns were provincial centres or capitals, with several thousand inhabitants, all of which had a regional importance as well as relatively sophisticated and distinctly urban economic, social, political and administrative structures. Between thirty and forty more towns were identified as the next largest and wealthiest, based primarily on records of lay subsidy payments from the 1520s. In addition it was proposed that there were up to three hundred widely dispersed towns

---

[15] Tiller, *English Local History: the State of the Art,* pp. 4-7.
[16] P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 4-5.
[17] A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester,* p. 12.
[18] W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (London, 1959); J. Patten, *English Towns 1500-1700* (Folkestone, 1978); P.J. Corfield, 'Urban development in England and Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town.*.

with distinctive economic functions, such as lively markets and broadly based occupational structures. Despite their small populations, probably less than 2000, it was suggested that their local importance set them apart from a large number of yet smaller 'quasi-urban or 'simple' market towns and large villages.[19]

Historians continue to acknowledge that there are problems associated with defining and categorizing urban settlements: 'The word town causes more confusion than almost any other used by historians'.[20] One particular difficulty has been to identify 'the elusive "urban factor"' in those many relatively minor urban communities that lack most if not all of the range of urban features according to the criteria that were originally proposed in the 1970s.[21] It has often proved easier to rely upon qualitative assessments, such as 'recognisably urban character' to identify minor towns, than upon suspect data about the local population or economy. In different chapters of the *Cambridge Urban History* Alan Dyer and Penelope Corfield suggested new terminology for minor urban settlements, 'market village' and 'micro town' respectively, but the differentiation between large villages and small, unsophisticated agrarian-based market towns will continue to be unsatisfactory.[22] In consequence there remains a lack of consensus about how many towns there were in England, and what proportion of the population lived in them. This in turn impacts upon attempts to rank or categorise towns; such efforts continue to be equally elusive, 'vexed by the apparently intractable challenge presented by a vast mass of diverse data'.[23] Although

---

[19] C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City,* pp. 7ff., 285.
[20] C. Dyer, 'Small places with large consequences: the importance of small towns in England 1000-1540', *Historical Research,* Vol.75:1 (2002), 2.
[21] K. Lindley 'Early Modern Urban Britain: Regions, Themes, and Types', *Journal of Urban History,* 28 (2001), 120-9.
[22] P.J. Corfield, 'East Anglia', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (Cambridge, 2000), 35; A. Dyer, 'Small market towns 1540-1700', in ibid., p. 427.
[23] A. Dyer 'The Early Modern Town: Toward a Clearer Definition?', *Journal of Urban History,* 26 (1999), 74-82.

rankings of towns in order of wealth or size are still presented these generally raise questions about the usefulness and reliability of the available evidence.[24] Rankings can only be viewed as partially indicative of a comparative importance, and typologies are equally unsatisfactory. Terms for larger towns (such as regional capital and county) and for smaller towns (such as country and market) can fail to recognise the individual importance of some urban centres that derived from location or specialist function, such as sea and inland ports or religious centres.

The second question that preoccupied early modern urban historians in the 1970s was 'the great debate' about crisis and decay in English towns.[25] Did 'urban decline' persist into the sixteenth century, and was it a national phenomenon? Most historians agreed that many towns, particularly large ones, had suffered long-term demographic and economic problems.[26] David Palliser argued for the continuation of a recession that began in the 1400s, pointing out that Tudor writers themselves emphasised the problem of urban poverty and decay; Charles Phythian-Adams' work extended the period of crisis for Coventry into the 1520s and beyond.[27] Clark and Slack's work on early modern towns supported and extended what remains the orthodox view that late medieval urban decay persisted into the sixteenth century, and had a lasting influence. They established a model of fluctuations of crisis and order for the early modern town throughout the sixteenth century, especially after 1570, emphasizing its vulnerability and the dislocating potential of such problems and pressures as inflation, population

---

[24]Alan Dyer suggests that care and cynicism are needed in the application of his ranking lists in 'Appendix: ranking lists of English medieval towns', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I (Cambridge, 2000), 747-70.

[25] Barry (ed.) 'Introduction', *The Tudor and Stuart Town,* p. 6.

[26] A.R. Bridbury's suggestions of economic buoyancy in *Economic Growth: England in the later Middle Ages* (London, 1962) provoked strong reactions, notably from R.B. Dobson, 'Urban decline in late medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 5th ser., 27 (1977), 1-22.

[27] D. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth* (London, 1992, 2nd ed.) p. 263; C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City.*

growth, social division, economic dislocation and cultural change.[28] Subsequent research modified the universal picture of crisis and decay, both before and after 1570. The reliability of evidence about wealth, population and complaints of dereliction was questioned, and the problems of some larger towns were contrasted with the demonstrable prosperity and 'more cheerful destiny of London and of the smaller towns'.[29] Rappaport suggested that London and other early modern cities should not be 'relegated to historiographical gloom and doom', but that the severity of urban problems had been over-stated and the institutional and social factors that promoted stability had been underestimated.[30] Alan Dyer's view was that towns were at their lowest ebb in the 1400s, when population, prices and exports were depressed. Although by the mid 1500s many towns had run into economic difficulties, with taxation, trade and industrial problems, epidemics and poor harvests, he considered this to be countered by rising population, better agricultural prices, and the cloth export boom.[31]

The intense debate about urban decay and crisis largely ran out of steam after the early 1980s. It remains an accepted view that any town was potentially unstable, and that depression and decline, whether slow or sudden, was a threat throughout the sixteenth century; it would not be surprising if 'townspeople regarded their world as

---

[28] P. Clark and P. Slack, *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972); P. Clark (ed.), *The Early Modern Town: A Reader* (London, 1976); Clark and Slack, *English Towns in Transition*; P. Clark (ed.), *Country Towns in pre-industrial England* (Leicester, 1981), p. 2; C. Patterson, 'Town and City government' in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (paperback edn., Oxford, 2009) p. 116.

[29] A sceptical overview of the debate is given in A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English towns 1400-1640* (2nd edn. Cambridge, 1995). See Chapter 5 in particular, 'The problems of evidence', pp. 29-42. Chapters 6-7 propose an alternative point of view, pp. 43-53. A general summary can be found in Palliser, *Age of Elizabeth,* Chapter 7, 'London and the Towns'.

[30] S. Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth Century London* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 19ff.

[31] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth,* pp. 27-8.

one of endemic uncertainty'.[32] Central government took measures from the 1530s onwards to support the economies of most large towns, and worry about urban decay and poverty continued into the Elizabethan era.[33] There was a well-established and well-understood fear of the results of loss of employment and trade in urban communities: for example in Norwich the decline of its staple cloth industry led to a time of stagnation, with complaints of merchants leaving the town.[34] However, detailed work on individual communities has continued to produce contradictory evidence, and has led to caution about generalisations.[35] New studies exposed the variation in urban experience: Goose pointed out that Reading was 'one of the rare urban success stories of the later middle ages'.[36] It became clear that population decline in a community did not always lead to a decline in wealth, and that demographic growth was not necessarily synonymous with prosperity. In towns like Stratford-upon-Avon population growth against the background of a static economy was linked with the growth of poverty, exacerbated by the immigration of poor families from the countryside.[37] One view is that the 'spate of detailed research on the demographic and economic fortunes of various late medieval British towns has been to demonstrate that urban reactions to such marked population decline were extremely diverse and not always completely inadequate'.[38] While it is self-evident that 'some towns were in difficulties; some always would be, especially when there was substantial economic change in progress', there is now no general agreement that

---

[32] P. Glennie, and I. Whyte, 'Towns in an agrarian economy 1540-1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (Cambridge, 2000), p. 168.
[33] Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth,* pp. 268-9.
[34] P. Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1985), p. 128.
[35] Barry, *The Tudor and Stuart Town,* pp. 6-7 summarises this debate.
[36] N. Goose, 'Decay and regeneration in seventeenth-century Reading: a study in a changing economy' *Southern History,* 6 (1984), 53-74.
[37] A. Dyer, 'Crisis and Resolution: Government and Society in Stratford, 1540-1640', in R. Bearman (ed.), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (Stroud, 1997), p. 90.
[38] R.B. Dobson, 'General Survey 1300-1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I (Cambridge, 2000), 276.

there was a universality of urban experience or a nationwide crisis of urban decline.[39] Contemporary accounts of decay in towns have been used as evidence of the persistence of late medieval urban decline: but it has instead been suggested that such accounts in fact reflect a positive attitude to opportunities for change and reordering.[40] Lilley provides an alternative narrative of an urban life that continued to attract investors and incomers, and of towns that were a dynamic influence in their regions, 'places of opportunity, inhabited by people negotiating their futures within a restless and a changing urban landscape'.[41] This view may be an over-modification of the paradigm of decay and decline in sixteenth century urban life, but it rightly highlights the need for ongoing and open-minded research into the fortunes of individual towns.

By the end of the 1970s ground-breaking research had gone a long way to establish the significance of the early modern town as an area for study. The debates about urban characteristics and urban decline were never fully resolved, but to a large extent had faded into the background. Subsequent research has moved away from what has been seen as an over-emphasis on economic topics, exploring a variety of themes and issues relating to cultural and social change that have led to a much broader interpretation of early modern English urban life. Theories about urban crisis and disintegration have been seen as a narrative that wrongly viewed post-reformation urban development as a 'threadbare period'.[42] The abundance and variety of research that has been published since the 1970s has more than adequately responded to the

---

[39] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns,* p. 47

[40] K.D. Lilley, 'Decline or decay? Urban landscapes in late medieval England' in T.R. Slater (ed.), *Towns in Decline* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 235-65.

[41] Ibid., p. 258.

[42] P. Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries* (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 58-9.

need to further the concept of urban history, and has long since demonstrated that towns form 'in themselves a worthy and coherent theme' for study.[43]

The increasing diversification in the field of early modern urban history has produced a large body of topical studies.[44] One major focus has been the revival of the study of London since the 1980s.[45] The study of the unique urban identity and development of sixteenth century London has produced its own historiographical debates: the doubling of its population combined with reformation changes was a challenge to social cohesion. There has been disagreement about the extent of economic problems and social conflict in the city, and how it absorbed forces of change that threatened the city's stability. The work of early modern London historians on the transformation of the environment, economy, society, politics, and cultural life of England's capital city has been crucially important to urban historians in general.[46] Every town was affected or influenced by London's development, because its economic power as an 'engine of growth' transformed the economies of many smaller

---

[43] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth,* p. 4.

[44] For example, P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988); P. Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1985); A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: the Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London, 1987); K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470-1750* (London, 2000); J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: the Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978); P. Borsay 'Early modern urban landscapes 1540-1800' in P. Waller (ed.), *The English Urban Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 99-124.

[45] For essay collections and overviews see A.L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500-1700: the Making of the Metropolis* (London, 1986); P. Griffiths and M. Jenner (eds.) *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social history of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000); V. Harding, 'Twenty years of writing on London history, 1975–1995: early modern London, 1550–1700', *London Journal*, 20 (1995), 34–45; J. Boulton, 'London 1540–1700', in P. Clark, (ed.), *CUH*, II, 315–46; V. Harding, 'Recent perspectives on early modern London', *The Historical Journal,* 47:2 (2004), 435-50. Thematic studies include I. W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991); J. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: a London Suburb in the Seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1987); J.F. Merritt (ed.), *Imagining Early London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720* (Cambridge, 2001); Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth Century London* (Cambridge, 1989).

[46] J.P. Ward, 'Metropolitan London', in Tittler and Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (paperback edn., Oxford, 2009); Griffiths and Jenner (eds.), 'Introduction', *Londinopolis,* pp. 1-23.

towns, and also because each community experienced similar social and governmental challenges in the face of reformation change, economic problems and population pressure.[47]

To an extent we have to agree that the early modern town is an ill-defined and 'murky idea' 'developed to fill the middling region left between these two poles [the medieval town and the modern town], in imitation of the general historian's concept of a transitional phase between medieval and modern'.[48] Although this view seems negative, it is true that ongoing research has shown that towns had developed and continued to evolve in very diverse ways, and so generalization and categorization has proved difficult. The old-fashioned Whiggish idea that the process of urban development from medieval to modern was necessarily progressive, improving, democratizing or desirable has been increasingly called into question. The move away from analysing towns in terms of demographic and economic growth or decline has resulted in a different and more uncertain interpretation of urban history, which relates more to social relations and practices than to economic circumstances.[49] All in all, unresolved factors and debates have continued to impede any formulation of a general theory of urban development. Historians have developed theories about the unique nature and quality of early modern urban life, and how this impinged on inhabitants and outsiders. In addition to their economic and administrative roles, towns have come to be viewed as reservoirs of 'a diverse rhetoric of urban culture', offering social, religious and educational experiences of 'utmost significance for those

---

[47] S. Jack, *Towns in Tudor and Stuart Britain* (London, 1996), p. 167.
[48] A. Dyer, 'The Early Modern Town: Toward a Clearer Definition?' *Journal of Urban History,* 26 (1999), 74–82.
[49] Griffiths and Jenner (eds.), *Londinopolis*, pp. 7-8.

hordes of anonymous visitors who never resided in them'.[50] Borsay and Proudfoot describe the search for the 'socially-constructed arena ... the mental and physical world created and mediated' by the town.[51] As a result historians have found it important to establish an urban context for national events and movements, and in the process the view that 'urban places lay at the centre of much of the dynamic change occurring in the sixteenth century' has become increasingly embedded in their theoretical approach.[52]

The general shift of interest away from economic and social factors to a concentration on religion and culture has given the events and the effects of the reformation a central position in the work of sixteenth century urban historians. Collinson set out to 'redress the historiographical balance' by insisting that the reformation was 'much more than a side show'.[53] The effect of the religious upheavals of the watershed era of the mid-sixteenth century reformation on the life of English towns has been explored in general studies and also in detailed studies of a wide variety of communities.[54] These have been written against a background of diametric opposition

---

[50] R.B. Dobson, 'General Survey 1300-1540', pp. 284f.

[51] P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (eds.), 'Introduction', *Provincial Towns in Early Modern England and Ireland* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 1-29.

[52] Barry, (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town*, p. 2; C. Patterson, 'Town and City government' in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn., 2009), p. 116.

[53] Collinson and Craig, (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns,* p. 36.

[54] J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984); P. Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries* (Basingstoke, 1988); R. Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1989); E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (London, 1992); C. Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993); R. Whiting, *Local Responses to the English Reformation* (Basingstoke, 1998); C. Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth Century England* (London, 1998); R. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns in England: Politics and Political Culture, c.1540-1640* (Oxford, 1998); V. Harding, 'Reformation and culture, 1540–1700', in Clark, (ed.), *CUH*, II, 263–88; E. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003). Studies of localities include C. Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire, 1540-80* (Cambridge, 1997); M. C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation,1530-1570* (Oxford, 1993); A. Hughes, 'Building a Godly Town: Religious and Cultural divisions in Stratford-upon-Avon, 1560-1640', in R. Bearman (ed.), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (London, 1997) and R. Bearman 'The early reformation experience in a Warwickshire

between reformation historians about the progress and popularity of the long and piecemeal process of reform. The reaction of ordinary people to the destruction of traditional religion has been variously interpreted as enthusiastic, collaborative, obedient, half-hearted, 'bewildered in pews or befuddled in alehouses', or unhappy and antagonistic.[55] Historians have produced evidence of the varied and localized nature of popular response in order to promote their theories about the strength of traditional religion and the advance of protestantism. Whilst there is little general consensus, it is generally and rightly agreed that towns shine a strong light on the complex and diverse process of change, as important for measuring the progress of the reformation from the Henrician period into the 1580s as for supplying evidence of lively parish religion before the reformation.

Historians developed new preoccupations in the effects of the reformation on wider aspects of urban life. Tittler proposed a greater recognition of the reformation as a turning point in urban history, particularly in terms of urban political development. He suggested the need to find a framework that defined the 'era' of the reformation and synthesised economic and social themes with those of religious, cultural and political development.[56] Shagan pointed out that religious change was governed by laws that the English people 'did not merely obey ... but also shaped the meanings of those commands, investing their reactions to the reformation with significance for their own economic, social and political lives'.[57] The link between religious and

---

market town: Stratford-upon-Avon 1530-1580', *Midland History,* 32 (2007), 68-109; S. Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989); MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors*; D. Underdown, *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the Seventeenth century* (London, 1993); M. Byford, 'The birth of a protestant town: the process of reformation in Tudor Colchester, 1530-80', in Collinson and Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns.*

[55] Haigh, *English Reformations,* p. 16.

[56] R. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 8-10.

[57] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, p. 303.

political themes has further exposed the profound importance of the reformation to the development of early modern towns.

In this context a dominant theme for historians has been the growth of oligarchic town government in the light of a governmental policy of support for urban communities. The dissolutions of religious houses and chantries created a void in many towns that went far beyond religious experience, leading to the transformation of systems of urban government.[58] Tittler set out to redress negative views about economic and social disruption and discontinuity. His interpretation modified criticisms of corrupt and socially-controlling elites, promoting a more positive view of strong and responsible leadership by 'small knots of reliable men' responsible to central government. New leadership in towns, especially in newly incorporated boroughs, often controlled the redistributed local resources in a way that increased hierarchical and oligarchic characteristics.[59] James had seen elite ruling groups as hostile to pre-reformation ritualistic God-centred culture, and anxious to introduce a political culture with an emphasis on civic heritage that was under their control.[60] Archer identified the inclusivity of civic ideology as part and parcel of a process of legitimization of the elite that was coupled with 'a strategy of exclusion' to outsiders. Tittler viewed the growth of urban identity as being strengthened by the involvement of ordinary townsmen at lower levels of town government and by the opportunity for all townspeople to participate in civic culture.[61] He identified policies to legitimize

---

[58] P. Cunich, 'The dissolution of the chantries' in P. Collinson and P. Craig, (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns* (London, 1998), pp. 159-74; Cunich, 'The dissolutions and their aftermath', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (paperback edn., Oxford, 2009), pp. 221-37.
[59] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 47ff.
[60] M. James, 'Ritual drama and the social body in the late medieval English town', *Past & Present,* 98 (February 1983), 3-29.
[61] Clark and Slack, *English Towns in Transition,* pp. 128-9; R. Tittler, 'The emergence of urban policy 1536-58', in R. Tittler and J. Loach (eds.), *The mid-Tudor Polity c.1540-1560* (New Jersey, 1980), pp. 74-93; R. Tittler, *Architecture and Power: the Town Hall and the English Urban Community, c.1500-*

leadership through buildings and ceremonial, as well as relationships with national and local government. Withington took the argument a bold step further, suggesting that urbanization in the sixteenth century was a sustained cultural, institutional and demographic process. He has emphasized the importance of the transformation of the ways in which towns were institutionally linked to the wider world. In his view England's 'era of incorporation' had created 130 incorporated cities and boroughs by 1600 that were 'ambitious commonwealths'.[62]

The single town study and the study of smaller towns

So does the study of a single town continue to play a useful and relevant role in urban history? Although there is often a call for studies of individual towns to test out concepts and identify trends, it is obvious that topical and thematic studies have become far more common than single town studies since the 1970s. However, the individual town is still an acceptable 'conventional unit' for study, as a distinct 'area of jurisdictional and documentary record'. The single town study has been modernized with the more rigorous approach that has evolved over the last forty years, requiring comparative data and a local and regional as well as a national context. Historians have become more aware of the overlapping 'communities of social, [economic] and cultural identity wider than those of a single settlement'.[63] As part of this development the growing importance of local history studies has contributed to new work on a range of localities, including significant studies of urban

---

1640 (Oxford, 1991); D.M. Palliser, 'Civic mentality and the environment in Tudor York', *Northern History,* 18 (1982), 78-115; J.W. Kirby, 'A Leeds elite: the principal burgesses of the first Leeds corporation', *Northern History,* 20 (1984), 88-107; I. Archer 'Politics and government, 1540-1700', in Clark (ed.), *CUH* II, 235-62; C.F. Patterson, 'Town and City government', in Tittler and Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain,* pp. 123ff.; C.F. Patterson, *Urban Patronage in Early Modern England* (Stanford, 1999); P. Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005). J.H. Thomas, *Town Government in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1933) remains an informative source for the mechanisms of town government.

[62] Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth,* pp. 6ff.

[63] Tiller, *English Local History: the State of the Art,* p. 4.

communities of limited national or provincial importance. With a focus on specific questions and problems, rather than on a general overview, a detailed single town study can be of great value to historians.[64]

In the early days of early modern urban history studies, researchers concentrated on large and nationally important towns. More recently the value of the detailed investigation of smaller as well as large towns by both local and mainstream historians has become apparent, particularly in terms of the development of wider historical theories. The national perspective enhances the local study, but sometimes detailed and relatively parochial information about a locality can modify generalist theories, as evidenced by studies such as Mayhew on Rye, Duffy and Craig on the reformation in a Devon village and a Suffolk town respectively, and Christopher Dyer on conflict in Shipston-on-Stour.[65] The single sixteenth century town study, as it has evolved, often focuses on a national (or regional) trend or event that has exposed the community to dynamic change. Its value lies beyond local interest, however small the town, because of 'the singularity of each urban place'.[66] There is an inevitable tension for the historian of the individual town between its distinctive nature and its position in a national pattern and general theory of urban development, but individual towns should be studied in the context of national, regional and local relationships, influences and concerns. Civic records in isolation can give an impression of an order and stability that has been called into question by new ideas about popular culture and

---

[64] G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (Falmer, 1987); P. Clark and L. Murfin, *The History of Maidstone: the making of a modern county town* (Stroud 1995); R. Bearman (ed.) *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (London, 1997).

[65] Mayhew, *Tudor Rye;* E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English village* (paperback edn., London, 2003); J. Craig, 'Reformers, conflict and revisionism: the reformation in sixteenth century Hadleigh', *The Historical Journal,* 42:1 (1999), 1-23; C. Dyer, 'Small-town conflict in the later Middle Ages: events at Shipston-on-Stour', *Urban History,* 19 (1992), 183-4.

[66] Dobson, 'General Survey 1300-1540', p. 273.

social behaviour.[67] The nature of local societies and the concept of the urban community continue to require exploration: efforts to define and rigidly categorise the 'urban-ness' of the early modern town have tended to obscure the fluidity of its social, economic, cultural and mental boundaries.[68] It has become increasingly evident to historians that the study of a locality is as much about what lies outside its physical boundaries as about its internal life. In conceptual terms a locality is a part of a whole picture; everything that happens within a town has to be measured, balanced and reflected against what lies outside. The central locality is the arena for a microcosmic investigation, set in a regional or national context, taking into account the concepts, themes and debates that go towards such a general theory, as well as assembling the 'total' history of a community.[69] New research into individual towns can benefit from a wide comparative and contextual approach, looking beyond the constraints of categorization, and making full use of ideas and questions generated by local, landscape, political, economic, cultural and religious historians.

The collection of essay studies *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* edited by Peter Clark was an effort to remedy the general lack of work on small settlements. The studies reveal a wide and complex variation in experience as well as the usual difficulties with definition and generalization.[70] There clearly were some small towns whose viability was vulnerable in terms of their interdependent relations with their

---

[67] For example, A. Wood, *Rebellion, Riot and Popular Politics* (Basingstoke, 2002); A. Fox, *Oral and Literate Cultures in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000); J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People* (London, 1994); Shagan, *Popular Politics;* P. Griffiths, A. Fox, S. Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London, 1996).

[68] See introductions to Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies Cultures and Kinship* and A. Shepard and P. Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester, 2000).

[69] The distinction between the microcosmic study and the microscopically local study was made by M.M. Postan, *Essays on Historical Method,* (1971), pp. 20-1, quoted in Tiller, *English Local History*, p. 3.

[70] P. Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995).

hinterland. Small town government, whether formally or informally exercised, was far more likely to be threatened or dominated by the interests of local nobility and gentry. However, the simple administrative and economic structures of small towns can be viewed as a strength; larger towns were often less stable, and could suffer catastrophically from changes in national trading, production and manufacturing patterns. Large towns tended to suffer from greater fluctuations of population, with inward migration causing overcrowding, poverty and unemployment and outward migration that reflected the loss of economic prosperity. In smaller towns inward and outward migration tended to be more predictable and controllable; marketing sustained even a sluggish economy; even food supplies were more secure where townspeople played an active part in the food production chain.[71] Smaller towns require further study, to ascertain their importance to both the regional and national picture.

Sixteenth Century Abingdon

This review of the historiography of the early modern town has identified a number of areas of discussion that will shape my investigation of sixteenth century Abingdon. Firstly, I will hope to show that it is a mistake to view small provincial towns as uninteresting places, and that a single-town study is viable whatever the size of the community.[72] The distinctive nature of sixteenth century towns and the variability of their legal status and functions makes categorization difficult unless the town is very large or very small. Abingdon's size and population were small and its political development limited, but in terms of urban nature and position in the urban hierarchy it was well established as one of the major Berkshire towns, and the pre-eminent

[71] See A. Everitt 'The marketing of agricultural produce'; Glennie and Whyte, 'Towns in an agrarian economy 1540-1700', pp. 167-94.
[72] C. Dyer, 'The importance of small towns', p. 1.

market town in north Berkshire.[73] In practice, studies of all kinds and sizes of towns are needed to inform a full range of research issues and questions. Problems of population expansion and movement, poverty and disease, and inflation, together with the effects of religious change, Tudor centralizing policies, the growth of internal trade and consumerism, the increasing dominance of London's metropolitan economy, along with post-reformation changes in land ownership and local politics, were experienced in comparable ways in all urban communities. A single town study of a town like Abingdon gives a valuable opportunity to analyse economic, administrative and socio-cultural aspects of a community at a time of flux.

A second challenge for a single town study is to balance the discussion between religious, political, cultural, social and economic changes in the urban community. We have seen that the work of urban historians since the 1980s has in general modified the paradigm of an endemic decline in urban life, and has brought a welcome and generally more balanced insight into religious, political and economic change in sixteenth century towns. In the process the balance has perhaps swung too far towards an emphasis on topics related to religion and political culture. The debate about economic decay and decline in the early modern town has been largely abandoned, and as a result economic factors, particularly the effect of reformation change on urban economies, have not gained enough attention. This study will take the holistic approach that should be at the heart of a single town study, and focus on economic and social factors as much as politics and culture. The thematic studies produced by urban historians since the 1970s have shown the value of assessing every

[73] See below pp. 45ff.

community in terms of comparative data and national context, and this represents a further challenge to the study of one town.

Abingdon in the reformation era is a place of particular interest to urban historians for a number of reasons. At the end of the middle ages it was a small town on the doorstep of an important Benedictine abbey. Abingdon had no national importance, although it had a distinctive regional role and was well-known because of the past fame of the abbey, its position on the Thames and its proximity to Oxford. Abingdon's lay commercial society, originally fostered by the abbey administration, had flourished thanks to the town's site on trade routes and a favourable regional economy. The town's leading men had developed quasi-civic roles in what remained technically seigneurial government. The abbey's dissolution in 1538 threatened discontinuity and chaotic change at every level and of every nature. Monastic towns have been viewed as peculiarly vulnerable to decline and decay in terms of reformation change, because of the abrupt withdrawal of administration that they experienced. This study is an opportunity to examine the force of this argument, and to ask whether Abingdon experienced political or economic crisis, or whether social or cultural problems were equally or more significant.

Two themes from recent historiographical debates are particularly important to questions about sixteenth century Abingdon. The first, mentioned earlier in connection with the urban decline debate, is the suggestion that smaller market centres generally prospered better than large towns in the early 1500s.[74] Alan Everitt's pioneering work had already identified an expansion in market centres in the

[74] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, pp. 11, 53.

sixteenth century.[75] The investigation of the comparative economic and social stability of smaller urban communities has led to new interest in their nature and function in the context of their political, social and economic development during the period.[76] The traditional view was that while small towns had a close and interdependent relationship with the surrounding countryside they were of limited and subordinate importance to large towns: this has been moderated by a new suggestion that some small towns played a more distinctive and independent role within the urban hierarchy. In 2002 Christopher Dyer emphasized the need for new research into the small town at the beginning of the early modern period. He argued that the apparently minor and local significance of small towns is misleading: he stressed their role as a dynamic force in the commercial hierarchy, communicating 'between the countryside and the higher reaches of the world of commerce', and also as a channel for migration and social advancement, and as centres for entertainment and culture.[77]

The second theme of particular relevance to Abingdon is the focus on smaller towns that forms part of Tittler's work on the political development of the sixteenth century town. This is evident in his suggestions for a new politically based urban typology. He proposes four main categories of pre-reformation towns: first the largest and most politically developed, secondly towns under close ecclesiastical lordship, thirdly towns with some degree of self-government, and fourthly the smallest towns under

---

[75] Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', pp. 467-90; 'The Banburys of England', *Urban History Yearbook,* 1, (1974), 28-38.

[76] For example, D. Marcombe, *English Small Town Life: Retford 1520-1642* (Nottingham, 1993); D. Postles, 'An English small town in the later middle ages: Loughborough', *Urban History,* 20 (pt.1) (1993) 7-29; J. Goodacre, *The Transformation of a Peasant Economy: Townspeople and Villagers in the Lutterworth area 1500-1700* (Aldershot, 1994); Underdown, *Fire from Heaven* on Dorchester, Dorset; R. Bearman (ed.) *The History of an English Borough: Stratford upon Avon 1196-1996*; as well as town studies in modern *VCH* volumes. See also A. Dyer, 'Small market towns 1540-1700' in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II, 425-50; A. Dyer, 'Small towns in England 1600-1800', in P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (eds.) *Provincial towns in Early Modern England and Ireland* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 53-67.

[77] C. Dyer, 'Small places with large consequences', pp. 1-24.

tight lay or ecclesiastical lordship. His view is that the reformation proved a developmental watershed in the second and third groups of towns. Among these were towns, like Abingdon, that gained new powers and responsibilities from central government. Local and regional sources aside, Abingdon had much in common with other towns emerging from the control of religious institutions after the reformation. They were all destabilized by 'a particularly sharp break with past practice', and experienced governmental change to different degrees.[78]

In the light of the process of stabilization in the 1540s and 1550s whereby the town achieved a new secular and autonomous identity, did the dissolution represent crisis or opportunity? As Tittler has pointed out, very few studies focus on the transfer of urban property, whereas Abingdon's excellent tenurial documentation allows a detailed discussion of how changes in property holding accompanied the transfer of authority in the town.[79] Once the civic elite gained governmental control, how did they establish good order and prosperity for their community, and what factors stood in their way? The details of Abingdon's governmental, economic and social stabilization make a key contribution to the continuing debate about decline and growth in sixteenth century English towns. The disruption of traditional relationships in Abingdon's society, and their subsequent re-establishment in the context of new

---

[78] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, pp.150ff. Many such towns are discussed in *VCH* volumes, such as Burton-on-Trent in *VCH, Stafford,* IX, 5-20, although the reformation period itself is not always well covered. Among studies on towns are G. Rosser on Westminster including *Medieval Westminster, 1200-1540* (Oxford, 1989); B. Harvey, also on Westminster, including *Living and Dying in England, 1100-1540: the Monastic Experience* (Oxford, 1993); J. Martin, 'The people of Reading and the reformation 1520-1570: leadership and priorities in Borough and parishes' (BRO, unsubmitted Reading Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1987); J. Craig, *Reformation, Politics and Polemics: the Growth of Protestantism in East Anglian Market Towns 1500-1610* (Aldershot, 2001) modifies some of the views expressed by R.S. Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290-1539* (Princeton, 1982); M. Zell (ed.), *Early Modern Kent 1540-1640* (Woodbridge, 2000); B. Dobson, 'General Survey 1300-1540', pp. 284-6.

[79] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 48-9. Exceptions are the studies of York, Exeter and Winchester listed in footnote 6.

formal institutions adds to our understanding of urban oligarchic government. Abingdon is an example of a town that experienced rapid politicization, moving from an archaic subservience to a resident lord into a direct relationship with central government through the consolidation of power among its urban elite. How did the elite negotiate with other interested parties, including members of court and royal officials with local connections, and local gentry, many of whom became increasingly involved in county government? How important a factor was the growth of civic self-confidence along with the advance of godly Protestantism?[80] Collinson asked 'What did the reformation do to or for the English towns?': Abingdon's development during the watershed reformation period can give us a part of the answer.[81]

Sources for sixteenth-century Abingdon

Francis Little was the first of many Abingdon town historians, writing a history in *c.*1627 of Abingdon's important medieval fraternity, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, and its equally prestigious secular successor, Christ's Hospital.[82] Abingdon's most important local historian was A.E. Preston in the early twentieth century. Preston was a sometime mayor of Abingdon and master of Christ's Hospital. He was responsible for rescuing and conserving documents, and used researchers to amass an extensive collection of transcribed material; he also published scholarly works on some of the town's institutions.[83] There have been many other publications that cover aspects of

---

[80] M. Brod, 'Dissent and dissenters in early modern Berkshire', (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 2002), Chap. 4, i discusses the origins of religious non-conformity in seventeenth century Abingdon.
[81] Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England,* p. 49.
[82] *A Monument of Christian Munificence,* ed. C.D. Cobham (Oxford, 1871). The original manuscript is in CHA. A.E. Preston considered Little's history unreliable, describing Little as 'imaginative and untrustworthy', *Christ's Hospital, Abingdon* (Oxford, 1930), p. 34.
[83] The unsorted 'Preston Papers' are filed at BRO under D/EP, and include some transcribed material from CHA. Publications include *Christ's Hospital* and *St. Nicholas, Abingdon and other papers* (Oxford, 1929, republished 1971).

the sixteenth century in Abingdon.[84] Specialist regional studies by Manfred Brod on religious dissent and Christine Jackson on the woollen industry have been an important addition to the history of Abingdon in the early modern period.[85] Other historical research on the early modern period in the region provides new perspectives on local and regional topics.[86]

However, as far as county studies are concerned, Berkshire has never had a strong regional identity, and very little regional history has been published. The Abingdon area, the former north Berkshire, was separated from the rest of the county by the Berkshire downs until 1974, when boundary changes moved north Berkshire into Oxfordshire. This change effectively placed Abingdon and its hinterland in a historical limbo, lacking a strong association with either county. Abingdon is included in a 1975 survey of Oxfordshire towns, and a survey of enclosure in Berkshire.[87] The history of the Abingdon area and Abingdon abbey was covered in *Victoria County History* volumes published at the beginning of the twentieth century. An up-to-date treatment of Berkshire's history can be found in Joan Dils' *An Historical Atlas of*

---

[84] J. Townsend, *A History of Abingdon* (London, 1910); A. Baker, *Historic Streets of Abingdon* (Abingdon, 1957), *Historic Abingdon: fifty six articles* (Abingdon, 1963); M. Cox, *Abingdon, Abbey to Borough* (Abingdon, 1974), *Medieval Abingdon* (Abingdon, 1990), *Abingdon 1556-1702* (Abingdon, 1993); J. Carter and J. Smith, *Inns and alehouses of Abingdon 1550-1978* (Abingdon, 1978); W.J.H. and M.J.H. Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays* (Abingdon, 1989).

[85] C.A. Jackson, 'The Berkshire Woollen Industry, 1500-1650' (Reading Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1993); Jackson, 'Clothmaking and the Economy of 16th Century Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, LXVII (2002), 59-78; Brod, 'Dissent and dissenters in early modern Berkshire'.

[86] M. Prior, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen and Canal Boatmen in Oxford, 1500-1900* (Oxford, 1982); M. Prior, 'The accounts of Thomas West of Wallingford, a sixteenth-century trader on the Thames', *Oxoniensia,* 46 (1981) 73-93; B.H. Todd, 'Widowhood in a market town, Abingdon 1540-1720 (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1983); J. Martin, 'The people of Reading and the reformation 1520-1570: leadership and priorities in Borough and parishes', partly published as 'Leadership and priorities in Reading during the reformation' in Collinson and Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns*; M. Yates, 'Continuity and change in rural society c.1400-1600: West Hanney and Shaw (Berkshire) and their region' (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1997); Yates, *Town and Countryside in western Berkshire 1327-1600* (Woodbridge, 2007); J. Bond, *Monastic Landscapes* (Stroud, 2004). In addition many useful local history articles and booklets have been produced on the towns and villages of historic Berkshire, most notably by Joan Dils.

[87] K. Rodwell, *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire,* Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Survey, Vol. 3 (1975); J.R. Wordie, (ed.), *Enclosure in Berkshire, 1485-1885,* Berkshire Record Society, 5 (Reading, 2000).

Berkshire, which includes old north Berkshire.[88] Little work has been done on county-based government in the early modern period.[89] In certain aspects Abingdon's true regional identity was based not in Berkshire but in the wider Thames Valley, with links to Oxford, Reading, Henley and, ultimately, London. Abingdon's important trading affiliations were linear, depending on the Thames and on major road systems. Recently published Oxfordshire *Victoria County History* volumes cover Oxfordshire towns that had contacts with Abingdon and north Berkshire.[90]

The factor that most often restricts the study of smaller communities is the lack of the central or local documentary evidence, which tends to survive better for larger towns. As Peter Clark points out, 'in many instances the student of the small town has no chance to raise the questions and issues which scholars of big cities take for granted as part of their basic programme of investigation'.[91] Abingdon is well-provided with primary source material, although some areas of interest are better covered than others.

Very little evidence survives for the abbey's administration in the years before its dissolution in 1538. There are some accounts from 1534-5 that relate to the last abbot's dispute with his steward, John Audlett; these give some financial details about the abbot's household.[92] Some of the events immediately before and after the dissolution of the abbey are recorded in *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII,* including

---

[88] *VCH, Berks* IV (1924) and II (1907); J.Dils, (ed.) *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* (Reading, 1998).
[89] An exception is C. Durston, 'Berkshire and its county gentry' (Univ. of Reading Ph.D. thesis, 1977).
[90] *VCH, Oxon,* IV (1979) (Oxford), XIII (2004) (Witney). Paperbacks have been published on work in progress on Burford and Henley: A. Catchpole, D. Clark and R. Peberdy, *Burford, Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* (London, 2008); S. Townley, *Henley-on-Thames, Town, Trade and River* (London, 2009).
[91] Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe,* p. xx.
[92] BRO/D/EP7/33.

correspondence between Abbot Thomas, Cromwell, Rich and John Wellesbourne, temporary keeper of the abbey site and later steward of the town.[93] There is a detailed account relating to the demolition of the abbey church, which reveals the extent of local involvement in the process.[94] Although there are no records relating to town administration under the abbey, accounts survive for the subsequent administration by the Court of Augmentations, as do records of some disposal of institutional property.[95] The archive of Abingdon's other medieval institution, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, is retained at Christ's Hospital, the institution that succeeded the fraternity in 1553.[96] A survey (a detailed rent-roll) of all the properties in the town was made in October 1554 in preparation for its incorporation as a borough. Known as the Amyce Survey after Roger Amyce, the Court of Augmentations' surveyor for Berkshire, this gives a remarkably detailed social and economic picture of the town, and includes information about property ownership and tenancies both before and after the dissolutions of the abbey and the fraternity. The site of the former monastery is described at the end of the property listings.[97]

The actions and policies of the officials of Christ's Hospital and the borough who governed the town after the 1550s, are well documented, although it took some years for their record keeping to become fully formalised. Christ's Hospital's administrative

---

[93] See Chapter 4. TNA and SPO references are given where scanned original documents have been viewed online, otherwise conventional *LP* references are used.
[94] TNA E101/458/1; see also *LP,* XIII pt.1, 1019.
[95] BRO D/EP/7/37 and 38, Minister's Accounts for 1538-39; Bodleian Library Oxford Mss. Rolls Berks: 9-10 (1547-8) Accounts of Revenues from land in Berkshire within the jurisdication of the Court of Augmentations; sundry grants can be found in *LP,* XIII-XXI, and in CPR from 1547.
[96] Due to restricted access, the archive cannot be properly researched. The Calendar of Documents Vol.2 (1399-1538) describes wills and leases; the Fraternity Rent Roll 1547-8 (transcription in BRO D/EP/7/33) gives details of Fraternity properties at its dissolution.
[97] TNA LR2/187 ff.196-214. The TNA document is presumably the original: copies and transcripts held in ABA are identical except for the omission of rental values of properties purchased from the Court of Augmentations. There is also a copy in Cambridge University Library under Gg.iv.21 (pers. comm., M. Brod). The Survey is discussed in detail below in Chapter 6.

activities are the better recorded: the minute book contains a copy of the Letters Patent of 18 May 1553 and early statutes, although the minutes only date from 1577. A survey also made by Amyce, an office copy delivered to Sir John Mason on 28 March 1553, gives a detailed list of rentals granted to Christ's Hospital and a summary list of anticipated expenses to be met from annual income. Summarised accounts date from 1553, in a volume that begins with a detailed account drawn up in the 1570s for inspection by the bishop of Salisbury.[98] I was fortunate to be granted limited access to the Christ's Hospital archive to inspect the documents that are listed above. It is clear (from listings and transcriptions in the Preston Papers that are deposited at Berkshire Record Office) that there are relevant documents in the archive that I did not have the opportunity to see.

Borough records are more limited apart from the town charter itself, with orders in council dating from 1556 but no minutes until the late 1500s and incomplete accounts.[99] However the detailed working accounts of the borough chamberlain have been preserved for the years 1557-1588, giving information about most of the corporation rent-roll: details of property repairs (including costs of supplies, wage rates, names of suppliers and workmen) as well as rent arrears, allowances and vacancies. Other corporation expenses are given, relating to almsmen, fees, the new school, hospitality and gifts.[100] Separate accounts were evidently kept, probably by the mayor, but have been lost: they related to other aspects of the administration, including receipt of some rentals and freemen's and burgesses' fines (other than 1557-

---

[98] CHA, Minutes Book, rental survey 1553, Accounts 1553-1606.
[99] ABA, Borough Charter 1555. The charter summarises some of the information collected in the Amyce Survey, and is reproduced in *Selections from the Municipal Chronicles of the Borough of Abingdon 1555-1897,* ed. B. Challenor (Abingdon, 1898), along with extracts from further charters and from orders made by the common council and minute books.
[100] ABA, Borough Chamberlain's Accounts, Vol. I, 1557-81, Vol.II, 1582-88.

9), and payment of the fee-farm. Another fortunate survival is a collection of transcriptions of borough leases dating from 1562, but there are no original sixteenth century leases held in the borough archive.[101] Papers relevant to the Blacknall family (lessors of the abbey site from the 1550s) have been deposited with the borough by the Verney family in 1907 and 1912.[102] However, there are no surviving borough or county judicial records for sixteenth century Abingdon, and this compromises our efforts to investigate some elements of social relations in the town.

As far as church records are concerned St. Helen's registers are generally complete, although the much smaller parish of St. Nicholas has no baptismal data from the sixteenth century.[103] Some of the St. Helen's entries include useful anecdotal information about occupation, illegitimacy and causes of death. Wills, inventories and administrations relating to over 250 Abingdon men and women processed by the archdeacon of Berkshire's court in the sixteenth century, in addition to over fifty PCC wills have been read and analysed.[104] There are no surviving churchwarden's accounts, however, for either parish until the late 1580s, apart from some published brief extracts from earlier accounts for St. Helen's, which refer to the process of

---

[101] Details of corporation leases dated 1562-1639 were collected under the heading of 'A brief of all the leases granted by the Mayor, Bailiffs and Burgesses ... with a brief note of all and every covenant therein contained', and were later bound into a volume called the Mayor's Book. The Abingdon and Area Archaeological and Historical Society archive holds a series of photographs of pages numbered 19-123; the whereabouts of the original volume is unknown. I have transcribed the earlier entries: there are 68 leases dating from before 1580, and a further 63 dated between 1580-1600.

[102] ABA, Verney Deeds. *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family,* ed. J. Bruce, (Camden Society, 56, 1853), 90-3 includes Abingdon documents.

[103] The original St. Helen's registers are in the church's archive, and St. Nicholas' registers are deposited at Berkshire Record Office, BRO D/P2. Transcriptions on CD, Oxfordshire Family History Society (OXF-AB01).

[104] BRO/D/A1, TNA PROB/11. There are no surviving Abingdon wills proved in the Bishop of Salisbury's Consistory Court for this period.

reformation change in the church.[105] Without these and church court material we have very little evidence about the life of the churches.

In general, apart from some references to poor townspeople in accounts and registers, the evidence for the lives of the people of Abingdon is inevitably weighted in favour of the public lives of the better-off townspeople, who paid taxes, took office, and left wills. There is a good survival of central taxation records in the National Archive, along with a number of chancery records, and these, together with local evidence, has enabled an extensive database of Abingdon families to be compiled.[106]

Opportunities to penetrate beyond official administrative records are few and far between, confined to comments in registers and minute books, and requests and bequests in wills. The lack of information about the private lives and personal opinions of Abingdon men and women in the sixteenth century is matched by the absence of descriptive material about the life and landscape of the town. Contemporary outsiders' accounts of the character of Abingdon are found in Leland and in Rich's letter to Cromwell in 1538.[107] There are two sixteenth century maps of Abingdon and its environs, on each of which there is an impressionistic sketch of the town's buildings: both maps relate to Blacknall interests in the abbey site and riverside land.[108] Pictures in Christ's Hospital Hall, that were commissioned to

---

[105] ABA, St. Helen's Churchwardens and Overseers Accounts 1587-1625; St. Nicholas' accounts are said to date from 1588 and to have been rebound by Christ's Hospital, but their whereabouts have not been verified. The only trace of earlier St. Helen's accounts can be found in 'Extracts from the churchwardens accompts of the parish of St. Helen's Abington ... with some observations on them by Professor Ward', ed. J. Ward, *Archaeologia,* I (Society of Antiquaries of London, 1770), 11-22.

[106] TNA E179. Returns made in the following years have been analysed: 1524 (E179/73/134), 1525 (E179/73/128), 1540 (E179/73/156), 1543 (E179/73/164), 1560 (E179/74/216).

[107] *The Itinerary of John Leland,* ed. L.T. Smith (London, 1906-8), II, 120-2; TNA SP 1/129 f.83 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4302280339), this letter appears in full in G.H. Cook, *Letters to Cromwell and others on the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London, 1965) pp.145-7.

[108] The 'Monk's Map' was donated to Abingdon Borough Council by the Verney family; there is a second map in the Verney archive at Claydon. See J. Steane, 'The Abingdon Monks' Map', *Oxoniensia,* 73 (2008), 17-32.

commemorate civic figures and endeavours, are the first early representations of Abingdon people and scenes to survive. They include the 'Bridge Builders', an early seventeenth century picture showing an imagined scene of two of the town's fifteenth century benefactors against a background of the building of the new bridges in 1416-17 and the town landscape.[109] It is, however, possible to go some way towards a reconstruction of the layout and appearance of the town by record linkage using the Amyce survey together with rentals, accounts, registers and inventories. At the end of the century Abingdon provided the model for a typical provincial town in Henry Porter's play, *The Two Angry Women of Abington,* published in 1599. This is a portrayal of a society that is countrified and class-ridden, but that is also lively and ambitious, and far from uninteresting.[110]

In summary, Abingdon's sixteenth century administrative and economic life is generally well documented, and there are adequate sources to research religious and cultural change in the town. Although the source material available for Abingdon gives only limited access to information about criminality and disorder, there is considerable scope for the linkage of disparate evidence (particularly from a good run of parish registers and a large collection of wills) to consider other aspects of the town's society. The surviving material that was generated by the administrative changes in the town after the dissolution, particularly the Amyce survey, gives a valuable opportunity for the detailed analysis of the topographical, social and economic landscape of a busy market and thoroughfare town.

---

[109] Fig. 14, p. 303.

[110] M.B. Evett (ed.), *Henry Porter's The Two Angry Women of Abington: a Critical Edition* (New York, 1980). The play shows knowledge of the Abingdon area, but little is known about Porter's life or his connection with the town.

Chapter 2

Medieval Abingdon: the abbey and the town

This study will show that reformation change was potentially disruptive to the town of Abingdon when it brought the long-established control of the abbey to an abrupt end. But it will also show that the secular economy and society of the town was sufficiently developed and independent to mitigate the discontinuity of the dissolution period. A lay leadership had evolved with the capacity to support the stabilisation of the town, and to take on a formal governing role. An understanding of the development of the medieval town and the changing interaction between the abbey and the townspeople is crucial to the assessment of sixteenth century change and renewal in Abingdon.

Before any discussion of the medieval abbey and town it is important to understand that Abingdon's urban character and development was highly dependent on its geographical situation. The town is on the south bank of the river Thames between Oxford and Wallingford. It was historically in north Berkshire, and is now in south Oxfordshire.[1] North Berkshire was bounded on the east, north and west by a great loop of the Thames, and cut across by the river Ock which joins the Thames at Abingdon.[2] Abingdon is at the north-east end of the Vale of the White Horse, and to the south the Berkshire Downs form a natural barrier between the Vale and the rest of Berkshire. The richer soils of the Vale and the upper Thames Valley have always been well known for successful arable production, and Leland commented on the

---

[1] The area of Berkshire roughly north of the Berkshire Downs became part of Oxfordshire as a result of county boundary changes in 1974. References to Berkshire in this work will be to the historic county of Berkshire.

[2] See Fig. 1, p. 34.

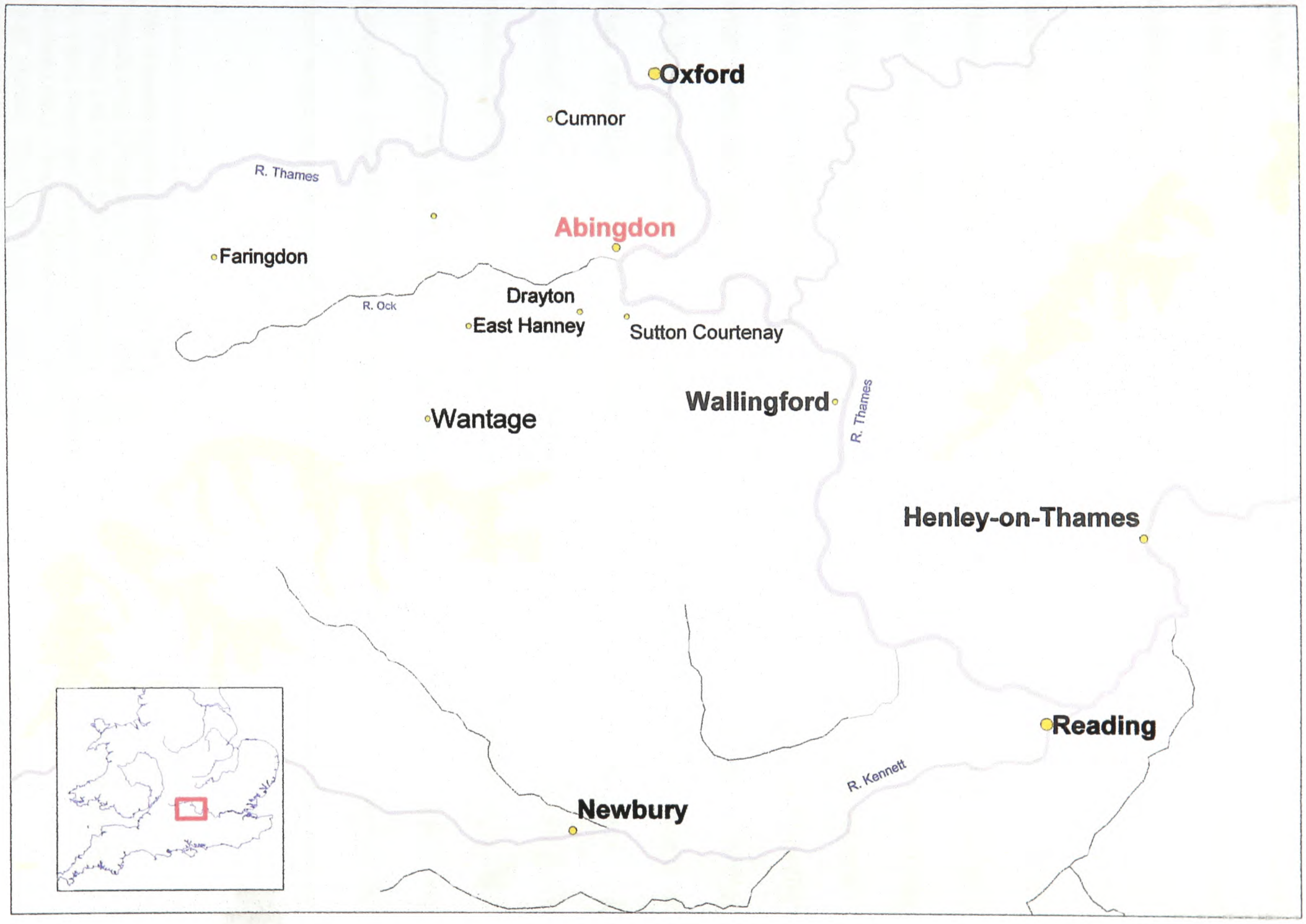


Fig. 1: Abingdon area

'fruitful vale' in 1542.[3] The Vale was the 'heartland of open-field Berkshire' with little enclosure during the medieval and early modern era.[4] This was an area of mixed farming. Dairy farming was also important in the Ock valley, while sheep were reared in the Vale and also on the chalk downs, producing good quality wool for the local cloth industry in the medieval and early modern period.[5]

Abingdon is situated on a gravel terrace, a dry site, by an 'important ford' of the Thames. This site had been a focus of settlement since the early prehistoric period.[6] 'The debatable valley of the middle Thames' was a contested border area both during the Iron Age and later in the eighth and ninth centuries.[7] It was one of four important towns in medieval Berkshire on strategic sites on the Thames. Abingdon and Reading were under the control of Benedictine abbeys, and there were royal castles at Wallingford and Windsor. There was also a royal castle at Oxford eight miles upriver from Abingdon. Initially the Thames was as important as any land route, and regarded as a 'continuous highway' between London and Oxford.[8] In the early middle ages river traffic was probably still equally, if not more important, than road, particularly for heavy goods. The abbey's improvements, made just before the Conquest, evidently including digging out a branch of the Thames to come into the town where there were two riverside wharves, St. Helen's and the Abbey, as well as

---

[3] *The Itinerary of John Leland,* ed. Smith, I, 120.
[4] Wordie (ed.), *Enclosure in Berkshire 1485-1885,* pp. xxvi and xxx.
[5] J. Thirsk (ed.), *Ag.HEW,* IV (Cambridge, 1967), 64-7; Dils (ed.), *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire,* p. 38; Yates, *Town and Countryside in Western Berkshire, c.1327-c.1600,* p. 27.
[6] Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire*, p. 33.
[7] F.M. Stenton, *The Early History of Abingdon Abbey* (originally published 1913, Stamford, facsimile reprint, 1989), p. 50; M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 2000), pp. 22ff. In the Anglo-Saxon era Abingdon was probably a royal minster under the control of Mercia and subsequently of Wessex, *Historia Ecclesie Abbendoniensis, the History of the Church of Abingdon,* ed. J. Hudson, (2 vols., Oxford, 2007), I, clxx.
[8] F.S. Thacker, *The Thames Highway: General History* (2 vols., New York, 1914), I, 19.

landing stages between the two.[9] However, by 1300 navigation upstream of Henley, especially for barges, had become a problem due to weirs, stakes, nets and dams erected by fishermen and millers. There has been debate as to whether or when navigation ceased completely, but it seems likely that by 1350 there was little or no traffic upstream from Culham, below Abingdon, to Oxford. Navigation upstream from Henley continued but probably became increasingly uneconomic and difficult for large barges, although otherwise probably good to Culham.[10] This must have been an important factor in the building of two bridges, joined by a causeway, across the Thames at Abingdon in 1416-18: not only did this access the wharf at Culham, but also improved the road from London through Abingdon and across the Cotswolds to Bristol and Gloucester, now established as a major route across southern England.[11] Abingdon was also on the north-south road between the Midlands (via Oxford) and the south coast (via Newbury, the only one of Berkshire's major towns not on the Thames). Abingdon's location at the very north of Berkshire, separated from the rest of the county by the downs, together with the importance of the route from London to the west, led to economic and social relationships with the towns of Burford and Witney, in west Oxfordshire, as well as with the nearby city of Oxford itself.[12] Because of the importance of the east-west and north-south routes Abingdon's links and affiliations were in many ways linear, due to longer-distance trading patterns, rather than county-based.

---

[9] Thacker, *The Thames Highway,* II, 143.

[10] R.H.C. Davis, 'The ford, the river and the city' *Oxoniensia,* 38 (1974), 258-68, Prior, *Fisher Row,* pp. 109 ff. and R.B. Peberdy, 'Navigation on the river Thames between London and Oxford in the late middle ages: a reconsideration' *Oxoniensia,* 61 (1996), 311-40; Thacker, *The Thames Highway,* I, 62. The continuing use of the Culham wharf by barge traffic throughout the sixteenth century is supported by documentary evidence, see below pp. 110, 267-8.

[11] Preston considers that the Abingdon bridge probably replaced an older one (contradicting Leland), but the Culham bridge replaced a ferry. Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 14.

[12] G. Lambrick, 'Some old roads of North Berkshire' *Oxoniensia* 34 (1969), 78-93.

The development of the medieval town

From the tenth century the relationship between the abbey and the town was set in a pattern that continued throughout much of the middle ages. The world outside identified the town with the abbey, and the abbey exploited and developed the dependent town in line with the economic and administrative objectives of its lordship. The Benedictine monastery of St. Mary, usually called Abingdon abbey, had a prestigious national profile. Before its dissolution in 1538 the abbey was the chief landowner in Berkshire. The monastery is said to have moved *c.*700 from nearby Boar's Hill to the riverside settlement, formerly named 'Seukesham, afterwards called Abingdon ... a royal seat ... also a place of religion.'[13] Stenton considers it unlikely that this first Abingdon foundation had 'ever been other than a little monastery built upon the royal demesne'.[14] It became a rich and important monastery after it was refounded *c.*950 during the reign of Eadred by St. Aethelwold, later Bishop of Winchester, the leading reformer of the tenth century monastic revival.[15] Aethelwold transformed this former monastic site, by that time served by a small group of secular priests, into a model Benedictine community: he was granted the royal estate of Hormer hundred before Eadred's death in 955.[16] Under his successors the refounded monastery acquired a great deal of property, with Hormer hundred and two other hundreds in north-east Berkshire (Sutton and Marcham)

---

[13] *Historia*, ed. Hudson, I, 241; M. Gelling, 'The hill of Abingdon', *Oxoniensia* 22 (1957), 54-62.
[14] Stenton, *The Early History of Abingdon Abbey,* p. 31. By the middle of the tenth century monastic religion at Abingdon is said to have been 'neglected and ruined', this was blamed both on Danish raids up the Thames and also on Alfred, who 'violently took away ... the village'. *Historia*, ed. Hudson, I, cxxxiv, cxxxvii.
[15] *Historia*, ed. Hudson, I, clxxi and 298f. Eadred is said to have given 100 hides, his 'royal estates in Abingdon' to Aethelwold and his 'flock of monks' to go with the 40 hides that remained to the monastery.
[16] B.Yorke, 'Aethelwold (904x9-984)', *ODNB,* online edn., Oxford, 2004 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/8920, accessed 9 Sept 2010] .

remaining the core estates.[17] After the Conquest the abbey successfully maintained its prestige, particularly with regard to its relationship with royalty and nobility. The royal residence on Andersey island continued to be used by successive kings until granted to the abbey by Henry I.[18] Abbot Faritius (1100-17) enhanced Abingdon's reputation: a well-known physician, he was trusted by Henry I and his court, and proved to be an efficient administrator, an intellectual, a builder and (most important to the writer of the *Historia Ecclesie Abbendonensis*) strong in the defence of abbey property and rights.[19] The abbey retained most of its estates, along with outlying manors on the Berkshire downs and also further afield in Berkshire and Oxfordshire, throughout the middle ages.[20]

The writer of the Abingdon Chronicle recognized the value of its central estate at Abingdon in agricultural rather than urban terms. The 'nobility of the village of Seukesham' was lyrically praised as:

> A renowned city, of desirable appearance, full of riches, surrounded with the richest farmlands, flourishing meadows, abundant fields, and milk-giving herds.[21]

Although nothing is known about secular life in Abingdon before the Conquest, the settlement associated with the refounded abbey had some urban characteristics in the eleventh century. The Domesday Book entry lists ten merchants dwelling in front of the church gate as well as 64 villagers and 34 smallholders with 34 ploughs. But the vill of Abingdon is not even mentioned by name and is included under the Domesday

---

[17] After the Conquest Marcham and Sutton hundreds became Ock hundred. Grants after the 950s may have been restorations or new: in any event the abbey may have subsequently lost some endowments before 1066. *Historia,* ed. Hudson, I, cxxxix ff.
[18] Ibid, II, lxv f, p. 73.
[19] Ibid., II, xlvi ff.
[20] Maps of the estates by C.J. Bond are in *Two Cartularies of Abingdon Abbey* ed. G. Lambrick and C.F. Slade (OHS, New Series, 32-33, 2 vols., 1990-92), II, Figs. 2 and 3, lxiv-lxv.
[21] *Historia*, ed. Hudson, I, 241.

entry for Barton, the abbey's home manor to the north of abbey precinct.[22] The abbey claimed extensive jurisdictional rights over Hormer hundred in particular.[23]

Abbot Vincent (1121-30) was forced to regain royal support and to pay 300 marks to retain the hundred of Hormer and control of Abingdon market. Royal protection was essential, against other local interested parties including royal officials: in 1163 the support of Henry II was needed in order to win a serious dispute about Abingdon market. The abbey had actively promoted Abingdon's development as a market town, in rivalry with Wallingford and Oxford, and men from these towns, after physical confrontation in the market place, brought a case against the abbey, trying to limit the range of goods that could be marketed at Abingdon, supplied by both cargo boats and carts.[24] After this there were no more threats against the town's economic expansion, although the abbey continued to be involved in expensive outlay, often involving litigation, to retain or regain lands and rights elsewhere well into the early fourteenth century.[25] As part of this policy the abbey was successful in retaining and adding to the privileges attached to its control of Hormer hundred, by obtaining successive royal charters.[26] One lucrative privilege was the establishment of the famous St. Mary's Fair, held for a week in association with the abbey's patronal festival on 8 September. The abbey maintained its close control of the administration of the town and of its markets and fairs until the dissolution, after *c.*1200 largely under the authority of the abbey kitcheners, who received customary rents and held their own court. There was also a hall-mote or port-mote that was presided over by bailiffs appointed by the

---

[22] *Domesday Book, Berkshire* ed. P. Morgan (Chichester, 1979), 7, 6. This may give a total of 110 heads of household for the town: Barton is listed separately with 2 slaves and 24 freedmen.
[23] *Historia*, ed. Hudson, I, clviii.
[24] ibid II, 313.
[25] *Two Cartularies*, ed. Lambrick and Slade, II, xxvii ff.
[26] Ibid., xxxv f.

abbey, and received market and fair profits. In addition, common law suits were heard at the abbot's court.[27] The legal status of the town remained that of a vill; tenancies seem to have had a mixed rural-urban nature, with money rents rather than work-service payable for tenements. Many holdings were to all intents and purposes burgage plots with appurtenances including land in the town's open fields.

The topography of the town is a physical expression of the symbiotic relationship between two communities where the potential for conflicts of interest can only have been exacerbated by their close physical proximity. The town developed within the defensive ditches of an iron age oppidum and this determined the evolution of its layout.[28] The ditches created an oval enclosure, bounded on the south by the Thames, and also connected into the rivers Ock and Stert. A branch of the Stert intersected the oval from north to south with the effect of forming two separate areas or enclosures.[29] The abbey occupied the eastern enclosure by the beginning of the middle ages, while the town developed in the western half.

At the end of the middle ages the abbey precinct was separated from secular Abingdon by a combination of a wall, ditches, the Stert stream and Stert Street. Extensive rebuilding and new building after the conquest had replaced the two earlier Saxon monasteries.[30] The great abbey church, claustral buildings and the abbot's lodgings dominated the centre of the site. The base court accommodated secular domestic and administrative buildings, including stables and malt-, brew- and bake-houses, close to the mill with two subsidiary gatehouses onto the Thames. There was

---

[27] Ibid., xxxvi.
[28] T.G. Allen, 'An 'oppidum' at Abingdon Oxfordshire', *South Midlands Archaeology,* 21 (1991), 97-9; this was followed by other reports in the same journal in subsequent years.
[29] See Fig. 2, p. 43.
[30] *Historia,* ed. Hudson, I, clxviii; *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick and Slade, II, xxiii.

also space for a lay cemetery and for orchards and gardens to the north and east. To the north of the main gateway was St. Nicholas' Church, founded for lay servants and visitors to the abbey. The church was built in the 1100s and was granted a small parish in 1372 consisting of Ock Mill, three abbey farms and the east side of Stert Street.[31] To the south of the main gate was the Hospital of St. John, a residential almshouse. The monastery conformed to a building plan shared almost identically by all Benedictine monasteries, based on the rule that the site should contain within itself every possible necessity.[32] Reading abbey, for example, had the same internal arrangements as Abingdon and was also sited similarly in a large precinct on the eastern side of the town. In Reading the market place was also outside the main west gate, and a river (the Kennet) formed the southern boundary.[33] At Westminster abbey the abbot's house formed a small courtyard at the west entrance to the abbey church, close to the inner gateway, as it probably did at Abingdon. While some religious houses in towns were cramped because of pressure of space, the topography of Abingdon enabled the monastery to maintain a standard Benedictine arrangement of space.[34] There was room for comfortable expansion, while preserving both physical and spiritual separations within the precinct and also between the precinct and the town outside.

The cramped and crowded core of the town had developed within the western half of the original oppidum, with West St. Helen's Street running inside the western line of

---

[31] Preston, *St. Nicholas*, p. 33.
[32] Preston, *St. Nicholas*, pp. 5ff. There is a conjectural map of the abbey precinct in *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick and Slade, I, lxiii. Cox, *Medieval Abingdon*, p. 144 suggests a slightly different layout, and *Historia,* ed. Hudson, II, cv, gives a more circumspect interpretation. Although there are very few physical remains archaeology has confirmed the position of the abbey church as traditionally remembered in the town. The Amyce Survey includes a description of the post-dissolution precinct.
[33] J.B. Hurry, *Reading Abbey* (London, 1901), map facing p. 148
[34] At Westminster shops and dwellings on the west side encroached on the sanctuary. Harvey, *Living and Dying in England 1100-1540,* pp. 6ff. C. Platt, *Medieval England* (London, 1978), p. 21.

the ditch. The central focus of the morphology of medieval Abingdon was the market place (or Bury) at the abbey gateway. The town and the abbey were most intimately connected in this liminal area where economic and administrative activities were concentrated, and within which confrontations and interactions between the two halves of the town were centred.[35] Figure 2 shows that the Bury is at the south-east corner of a square arrangement of streets which lead to the main routes out of the town: the eastern route across the Thames (via Burford or Borough Ford Street), the road west along Ock Street which crossed the Ock to go south, the main road to the west via Boar Street and Shippon, and the northern road to Oxford through the Vineyard.[36] St. Helen's church was a secondary focus and it has been argued that the radial arrangement of East St. Helen's and West St. Helen's streets might indicate that this was originally the primary settlement.[37] There are no obviously planned areas in the town but it is likely that the abbey controlled a piecemeal development from an early date. Both small and large burgage plots are identifiable in the central part of the town, on the streets nearest to and leading into the marketplace, which was originally much larger. Development along these roads spreading outside the original ditched area was well-established by the end of the middle ages, with the ends of Ock Street and Bore Street closest to the town most intensively occupied. Excavation of medieval housing in the eastern half of Ock Street showed that it was 'reminiscent of the fully developed street frontages known from much larger medieval towns'.[38] Further out there was more scattered development, some industrial but mainly

---

[35] See Figs. 3 and 4, p. 44.
[36] See p. 43. The evolution of the medieval streets and street names is discussed by Baker in *Historic Streets of Abingdon.* The names changed from time to time, and those used in this work are taken from the Amyce Survey.
[37] Rodwell, *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire,* p. 33.
[38] M.R. Roberts *et al*, 'Excavations at 83-88 Ock St., Abingdon', *Oxoniensia,* 62 (1997), 178.

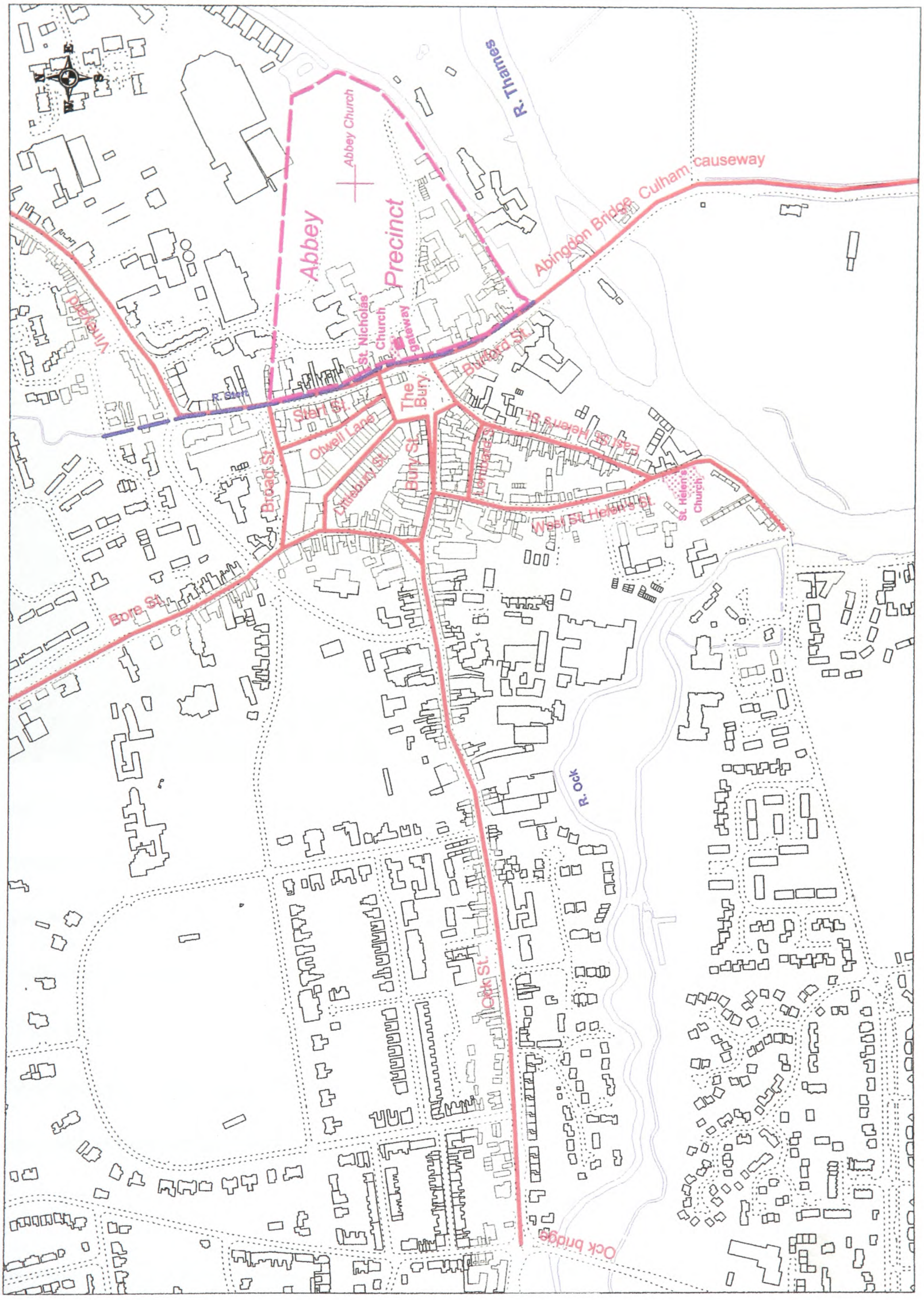


Figure 2: Abingdon in the Sixteenth Century

This map shows roads and features of late medieval Abingdon in colour, set against the modern developed street plan.

Fig. 3: View across Abingdon market place looking towards the east face of the abbey gateway and St Nicholas' Church. (Henry Taunt, 1880; reproduced by permission of English Heritage, NMR Reference Number: CC44/00043).



Fig 4: Reverse view of the market place from beneath the Abbey gate with St Nicholas Church on the right. The market house built in 1677 was on the site of the earlier market houses. The market cross erected by the fraternity once stood between the market house and the gateway. (Henry Taunt, 1882; reproduced by permission of English Heritage, NMR Reference Number: CC97/02021

agricultural, associated with the open fields to the north and north-west. Agricultural housing was also centred on the hamlets of Shippon and Northcourt, and on three nearby manors: the abbey's home manor of Barton to the east, the manor known as Fitzharris on Bore Street to the north, and the manor of St. Helen's on the other side of the Ock.[39] The abbey precinct and the Thames formed natural barriers to any urban development to the east and south, and there was no development on the floodplain on the north (Oxfordshire) bank of the Thames.

[39] Fitzharrys (or Fitzharris) and St. Helen's (later known as Caldecott) had originally formed the major part of two knight's fees, and had land in the open fields of the vill of Abingdon. *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick, II, xxiv.

The expansion of the town in the later middle ages reflects its growing importance both as a local and a long-distance marketing centre. The accounts for the manor of Cuxham in South Oxfordshire confirm that Abingdon market was the demesne's principal source of supply for many items, especially livestock, although Cuxham was much closer to Wallingford.[40] Abingdon escaped the economic depression experienced by many towns, including Oxford, in the fourteenth century. It eclipsed its old rival Wallingford and the less important market towns of Wantage and Faringdon, and was firmly established as the main centre of exchange in North Berkshire. Abingdon's economic stability at this period supports the argument that smaller towns had a resilience due to a symbiotic relationship with their rural hinterland, so long as thriving local marketing underpinned their non-specialised economies.[41] In addition Abingdon was well placed geographically to act as an entrepôt or collection centre for goods moving out of the region. As Christopher Dyer says, 'small towns were not optional additions to the economy, but formed the crucial means of communication between the countryside and the highest reaches of the world of commerce'.[42] Wool and cloth were a major part of Abingdon's local and long-distance trading, developed through twice weekly markets and five annual fairs, including St. Mary's Fair, regarded as 'one of the great wool and cloth fairs of southern England, attracting both English and continental merchants'.[43] Abingdon was also developing as a specialized corn market. In 1295 cornmongers purchased grain for the crown in the town. London's expanding demand for grain had placed

---

[40] P.D.A. Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village* (Oxford, 1965), p. 102. Cuxham corn, however, was destined for London and sold at Henley; in 1300-1 the reeve spent 40 days in Henley.
[41] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth,* p. 53.
[42] C. Dyer 'Small places with large consequences', p. 3.
[43] Jackson, 'Clothmaking', p. 61; Yates, *Town and Countryside,* p. 198.

Abingdon at the furthest end of a supply chain that provisioned the capital via Henley-on-Thames, a more important entrepôt much closer to London.[44]

There is evidence for cloth production in Abingdon in the thirteenth century, with weavers, fullers and dyers working in the town, and this was probably promoted by the abbey which owned fulling mills and a dyehouse.[45] In 1330 Abingdon was included in a royal summons to towns to send wool merchants to confer in York, and by the 1400s there was an established rural cloth industry centred on Abingdon. Berkshire produced short staple good quality wool suitable for broadcloths that found a market both home and abroad.[46] Abingdon's prosperity in the later middle ages encouraged a flourishing secular economy and society. Analysis of valuations for lay taxation in 1334 places Abingdon as the 46th wealthiest town in England (not counting ecclesiastical wealth). In comparison to other towns in the region, Abingdon's assessment put it on a par with towns like Cirencester and Banbury, not far below Reading, but well below Oxford and Newbury.[47] It has been estimated that of about 700 towns in the later middle ages, 650 or so had a population of less than 2000 and can be regarded as 'small'.[48] The 1327 subsidy list for Abingdon gives the names of 119 taxpayers.[49] Abingdon's ranking in 1334 suggests that it was relatively wealthy for a 'small' town, and the situation was not much different by 1524-5 when there were 138 taxpayers altogether and Abingdon's ranking was probably more realistic at

---

[44] B.M.S. Campbell, *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London region c.1300* (London, 1993) p. 51; Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', p. 520; Townley, *Henley-on-Thames,* pp. 41ff.
[45] Jackson, 'Clothmaking', p. 61.
[46] *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Ed. III,* ed. H.C.M. Lyte (I, 1327-30), 237; Yates, *Town and Countryside,* pp. 82-3, 199.
[47] A. Dyer, 'Appendix: ranking lists of English medieval towns', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I, 755-6. The ranking is problematic, and should only be viewed as indicative because of missing data. There is no surviving data for Abingdon in the 1377 Poll Tax returns.
[48] C. Dyer, 'Small towns 1270-1540' in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I, (Cambridge, 2000), 505-37.
[49] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon,* p. 53.

71st.[50] The subsidies are not directly comparable, but hint at a degree of stability of the tax-paying population that is consistent with relative economic success in the fifteenth century.[51] Berkshire was one of England's wealthiest counties in both 1334 and 1515, and it seems likely that agricultural and trading profits protected its towns from economic problems.[52]

Social and administrative change in the later medieval town

The development of a commercial economy in medieval Abingdon led to social and administrative changes that, as this study will show, had important long-term implications for the town's ability to meet the challenges of the reformation period. Knowles considered that until the middle of the thirteenth century the proprietors of monastic towns were 'content' with the good trade and 'good order' that prevailed in them.[53] This is an old-fashioned way of expressing the fact that, as is probably true, seigneurial authorities did not anticipate competition with townsmen over the control of local resources. Economic growth, however, encouraged the growth of an independent and ambitious secular community, and by the end of the thirteenth century Abingdon's lay community came into conflict with the abbey about rights and privileges. But the town had an 'equivocal legal status ... somewhere between the equivalent of a borough and a feudal demesne', as shown by enigmatic documentary references to burgi, tithings and *probi homines*.[54] In common with other towns, the leading townsmen found that joining forces in a guild gave them an opportunity to

---

[50] See below pp. 77.
[51] Archaeology suggests possible settlement shrinkage in the Vineyard due to post-Black Death population loss (pers. comm., Tim Allen, Oxford Archaeology, 2007) but this was countered by new development and infilling in more central areas of the town.
[52] R.S. Schofield, 'The distribution of wealth in England, 1334-1649', *Ec.HR*, New series, 18 (1965), 503-10.
[53] D. Knowles, *Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 265.
[54] G. Lambrick, 'The impeachment of the Abbot of Abingdon in 1368', *EHR*, 82:323 (1967), 250.

establish a clearer identity, and to explore their common interests and aspirations. The guild, attached to the Chantry of the Blessed Mary at St. Helen's church, was active by 1247.[55] Although, as the following narrative will show, the leading townsmen failed to make any formal impact on the abbey's authority, the efforts of townsmen to act collectively had positive effects on the strength of the community. Historians have seen this as an era when the authority of town leadership was enhanced, and have recognized the beginnings of 'the sort of polarized, hierarchical and oligarchic characteristics' that would later come to prevail in towns.[56]

Although it is not clear how or when the interests of the abbey and the town first diverged in Abingdon, the townsmen's growing antagonism and disrespect stemmed from a variety of trends and changes. They must have been aware of political disturbances in other monastic towns, and of their commercial and economic subservience in comparison to townsmen in less restricted communities. Abingdon's establishment as the marketing centre for northern Berkshire had brought about a larger and newly prosperous proportion of the population with no direct economic dependence on the abbey, and for whom the abbey's earlier investment in the town's commercial life was only a memory. Furthermore, the reputation and prestige of Abingdon abbey had suffered: the abbey's aggressive estate policies had been expensive and problematic, and there is evidence that its spiritual life was suffering. It is thought that the abbey had become increasingly reliant on its income from the 'free hundred' of Hormer, with the result that the townsmen came to view the abbey's monopoly of trading profits in the town as exploitative.[57]

---

[55] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 16.
[56] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 18.
[57] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon,* p. 31; *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick, II, xxvi ff., lv ff.

The first known overt expressions of discontent in Abingdon were protests against a new eight-day fair in 1290. The abbot was forced to agree formally in 1294 to forego tolls for the new fair. Leading members of the Guild of our Lady sealed the deed on the town's behalf, and it is significant that the deed was carefully preserved in what became the archive of the later founded and more important guild, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, now the archive of Christ's Hospital.[58] Trouble continued for the next century, with riots at the time of St. Edmund's Fair in 1296 and 1315. Townsmen were regularly accused of obstructing the abbot's officials at weekly markets, fairs and courts, and their activities must have become well known. When the trouble climaxed in violent riots in 1327 their numbers were bolstered by the men of Oxford (mayor, burgesses and scholars). Grievances may have been exploited by supporters of Queen Isabella against her husband, Edward II, in Abingdon and elsewhere, including the monastic towns of St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds.[59] Ensuing events gave Abingdon a brief national notoriety. The market house was burnt down, the monastery was looted, and the three monks who had not escaped were forced to agree to demands for self-government by a provost and bailiffs elected by the men of the town. The abbot was soon restored under royal protection with all his former privileges: the indictment of the ringleaders, some of whom were hanged, lists many local confederates.[60] The abbey remained worried about attack and was permitted to crenellate its walls in 1330, and also kept a store of arms, which was added to in 1375 and 1383.[61]

---

[58] *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick, II, xl and C.99.
[59] G. Lambrick, 'Abingdon and the riots of 1327', *Oxoniensia,* 29 (1964), 129-41 gives the political context.
[60] *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick, I, L.516 and L.517 (326-30).
[61] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon*, p. 67.

Active confrontation over political and economic freedom was acted out in all sorts of urban communities. In Oxford, where the townsmen enjoyed a well-established corporate identity, 150 years of rivalry and intermittent violence between town and gown culminated in the St. Scholastica's Day riot in 1355.[62] Towns controlled by monasteries (which Knowles referred to as 'the monastic boroughs') did not form a homogeneous group in terms of origin, growth and organization; what they did hold in common was that they all struggled and nearly all failed to achieve the levels of independence secured by towns controlled by the crown or by secular lords.[63] In Reading, St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds the townspeople were all, like the men of Abingdon, seeking some sort of political and economic freedom from a physically and politically dominant Benedictine abbey. The merchant guild in Reading, by the thirteenth century the most important town in Berkshire, was engaged in ongoing disputes with its abbot, and had won concessions in 1254 after armed stand-offs with the abbot's bailiffs, although at no stage did the abbot ever recognize the office of the mayor.[64] In St. Albans 'the abbey and the town seem to have furthered the interests of each other' until disputes started in the second half of the thirteenth century; there the abbey's straitened finances may have been to blame.[65] In Bury St. Edmunds, where riots in the 1260s led to the temporary expulsion of the abbot, 'the dominant fact of political life ... was that the Benedictine Abbey ran the town; the dominant activity was the struggle of the town's burghal elite to assert their independence'.[66] Barbara Harvey, writing about Westminster, points out that Benedictines achieved a 'remarkable degree of identification' with the upper class secular life of their times;

---

[62] *VCH, Oxford,* IV (1979), 48f.
[63] Knowles, *Religious Orders in England,* pp. 263-9.
[64] *VCH, Berkshire,* III, 42-64; Martin, *The People of Reading and the Reformation 1520-1570,* pp. 12f.; Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 236.
[65] *VCH, Herts,* II, 477ff.
[66] Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290-1539,* p. 215

they were reputed to be particularly repressive landlords with no sympathy for the aspirations of local townsmen.[67] At Westminster, however, cordial relations persisted between the abbey and the large community of 2-3000 people that grew up around it; this may have been due to the abbey's role as affluent consumer and employer. As Knowles concludes, attempts by monastic towns to secure self-government 'failed, almost without exception, for the townspeople were fighting against a resident deathless body which had the support of the crown. When recourse was had to violence ... royal courts invariably gave judgement for the monastery' in order to preserve the *status quo*.[68]

Nevertheless Abingdon's townsmen began to take a more sophisticated approach to their disagreements with the abbey by pursuing litigation. In 1345 the Le Spicer family tried to claim free tenancy of market stalls on land the abbot successfully claimed to be waste. After the abbot had accused tradesmen of violent disturbances in the market in 1363, the townsmen employed a London lawyer, though without success. In 1372 the townsmen lost a lengthy and bold case of impeachment against the abbot, arguing that the market usurped royal privileges.[69] Although other monastic towns, including St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds had taken the opportunity of the national unrest of 1381 to make attacks on their abbeys, there was no known violence in Abingdon, although there was obviously some local involvement with the revolt, because some prominent Abingdon men were named as insurgents in a warrant to the Sheriff in 1381.[70] It was not unusual at this period for guilds and fraternities to be a focus for unrest, and after 1381 the crown viewed the

---

[67] Harvey, *Living and Dying in England,* pp. 6f.
[68] Knowles, *Religious Orders*, p. 265.
[69] *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick, I, L.519, 332; Cox, *Medieval Abingdon*, pp. 59f.; Lambrick, 'The impeachment of the Abbot of Abingdon in 1368', pp. 250-76.
[70] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 49.

potential seditious behaviour of such institutions (particularly those that were new or unchartered) with increasing suspicion.[71]

The argument between the abbey and St. Helen's church at the end of the 1300s shows that far more than commerce was at stake, and suggests a reaction by the abbey to the growing control of the church and the guild over the hearts and minds of Abingdon townsmen. By the end of the fourteenth century the Guild of our Lady, administered by the proctors of St. Helen's church, had operated as an engine for political and administrative change beyond and outside its pious, ceremonial, social and charitable functions for over a century. St. Helen's church was the only parochial centre and had been the only early focus for the lay community.[72] The church had been greatly extended; the new building included a Lady Chapel with a ceiling of 52 high quality painted panels.[73] In the 1390s the abbot persuaded the pope to withdraw the burial rights the church had been granted, and had already used, after land for the new graveyard had been granted to feoffees to the use of the Guild of our Lady at St. Helen's church by the owner of the manor of St. Helen. Parishioners had complained that graves in the lay cemetery were desecrated by rooting pigs and tombstones sold off by the monks. After the pope's judgement the abbey took the shocking step of having sixty-seven corpses exhumed and reburied in the lay cemetery at the abbey.[74] The abbey administrators showed themselves to be surprisingly insensitive to the devotional requirements of parishioners, and it would be surprising if their actions did not have a bad and lasting affect on their reputation in the town. Remembering and

---

[71] D.F. Crouch, *Piety, Fraternity and Power* (Bury St. Edmunds, 2000), pp. 13f. The 1388 Cambridge Parliament proposed the suppression of almost all guilds and fraternities.
[72] St. Nicholas Church had a very small number of parishioners, Preston, *St. Nicholas*, p. 30.
[73] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon*, pp. 70f.
[74] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon*, pp. 69-70; *Two Cartularies,* ed. Lambrick, I, 447-8ff. Preston; *Christ's Hospital*, pp. 8ff.

praying for the dead was a central feature of late medieval spiritual life; this was a religious culture which believed that the 'dead were not silent' and that 'their demands were articulated by the living'.[75]

It has been suggested that in the monastic town the 'close and dangerous proximity of two very different types of human community, with very different objectives' created a recipe for dispute that was often more acrimonious 'when the towns in question were neither so large that they could largely ignore their monastic neighbours nor so small that they were powerless to resist them'. After the beginning of the fifteenth century arguments between abbey and town largely ceased. This may, as has also been suggested, have been because both sides came to see the advantage of a 'reasonably amicable *modus vivendi*'.[76] It seems more likely that peaceful relations were as a result of subtle shifts in the balance of power. The town's business expansion had made Abingdon's status as an economically and socially successful town more secure. Its involvement in the wool trade attracted incomers like Geoffrey Barbour, a wealthy Bristol wool merchant from Wales, who set up business in Abingdon *c.*1370. Barbour became a civic investor and benefactor, and is said to have paid 1000 marks in wages to the labourers who were building the new bridges.[77] Leading townsmen like Barbour were not only socially acceptable to the abbey, but offered a less obtrusive challenge to the abbey's power.

A more harmonious phase of the relationship between town and abbey was associated with a new and more prestigious guild, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, probably

---

[75] P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002), p. 6.
[76] B. Dobson, 'General Survey 1300-1540', *CUH,* I, 285.
[77] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 48-50.

established in the early 1400s as a voluntary society initially called the Brotherhood.[78] The growing wealth and sophistication of leading townsmen was able to foster a social, cultural and spiritual life that could develop independently of the abbey, but in a manner that was acceptably conservative. This change is exemplified by their use of the land acquired for the failed St. Helen's cemetery, firstly for a processional way, and later for almshouses.[79] Ambitious initiatives for civic projects emerged with the new fraternity, perhaps due to businessmen like Barbour who had experienced life in larger towns elsewhere, perhaps due to local gentry who were attracted to membership at an early stage. It is typical of this period that donors preferred to support religious institutions under lay control. Donations, including property in and outside the town, transformed the activities of the fraternity into an exclusive institution with a county-wide profile. Sir Peter Bessils from Besselsleigh nearby donated stone for the bridges. Sir John Golafre left the fraternity the manor of St. Helen's. Thomas Chaucer of Ewelme in Oxfordshire, his son-in-law the Duke of Suffolk and Lord Lovell were all members during the fifteenth century. The abbey appears to have had a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the fraternity's charitable works and projects, which were respectable, prestigious and unthreatening. Crouch considers that 'the key' to a guild's 'successful' relationship with a local authority was 'their conservative piety'. The mutual attraction between successful guilds and influential members might be interpreted as a step towards the creation of a local political power base.[80] There is, however, no evidence that local gentry were taking sides against the abbey by joining the fraternity, nor of any opposition from the abbey towards the fraternity at any stage.

---

[78] The first use of the word 'Fraternity' in Abingdon was in 1436 according to Preston, *Christ's Hospital*, p. 12.
[79] Ibid., p. 11.
[80] Crouch, *Piety, Fraternity and Power,* p. 85. The government enacted legislation in 1436 intended to ensure guild compliance with orthodox lay piety p. 245.

The fraternity was probably the prime mover in obtaining a royal licence to build new bridges and a connecting causeway across the Thames at Abingdon and Culham in 1416-17: the licence was obtained by two of its members in the name of the Commonalty of Abingdon.[81] Previous major projects to improve trade in the town had been instigated by the abbey: the town's laity invested in the scheme to build the new bridges and the abbey did not contribute at all, other than to sell a strip of land at the price of £115. With its incorporation in 1441 the fraternity gained the respectable status of an official body, and was allowed to acquire land in mortmain up to the value of £40, later extended to £100. Its privileges were confirmed and extended by the Crown in 1484, 1509 and 1520. New building at the St. Helen's site enhanced the fraternity's corporate life.[82] A fourth aisle was added for the use of the fraternity; members maintained the new St. Katherine's aisle, its altar and two chaplains through legacies.[83] A new group of almshouses called Long Alley or the New Almshouse was built behind the church to provide for 'thirteen poor sick and impotent men and women', as detailed in the charter. This was to be a high status almshouse, for

[81] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 13. The licence is in the Christ's Hospital archive.
[82] See figs. 5 and 6, p. 56.
[83] Ibid., p. 18.



Fig. 5: View of St. Helen's Church from East St. Helen's Street, Abingdon. (Henry Taunt, 1885; reproduced by permission of English Heritage. NMR Reference Number: CC44/00039).



Fig. 6: Christ's Hospital New Almshouse, now known as the Long Alley Almshouses, showing the porch and cloister walk built in the early seventeenth century in front of the original almspeople's rooms. The Hall is located centrally under the cupola. (Henry Taunt, late nineteenth century; reproduced by permission of English Heritage. NMR Reference Number: CC97/02086).

members of the guild, elderly and respectable long-term Abingdon residents, a similar clientele to that of the St. John's almshouse by the abbey gateway. There was already an 'Old Almshouse', possibly the same building described as the 'Almshouse over the Water' (perhaps built by Barbour in the late 1300s) which accommodated the homeless poor in one hall and twelve chambers, and was maintained by alms apparently administered through St. Helen's church.[84]

With the building of the bridges the fraternity members had enlarged their sphere of interest beyond St. Helen's. With another public work they asserted their new role at the centre of town life. The erection of the ornamental market cross in the market place opposite the abbey gateway was a status symbol planned in celebration of the fraternity's incorporation. The cross, over 50 ft. high, was built in the 1440s; Leland described it as a 'right goodly cross of stone with fair degrees and imagery'.[85] The design was grandiose; there were three tiers incorporating statues of kings and saints, and carved escutcheons. Large medieval towns, like Bristol and Gloucester, had important crosses that celebrated their civic history, with representations of royal figures who had granted charters conferring political liberties. Although the fraternity had no political past to celebrate, they associated their guild with representations of temporal and spiritual power, almost certainly using imagery associated with the abbey's past to lay a public claim to their share in the town's cultural history.[86]

The Guild of Our Lady continued to be closely identified with the religious life of St. Helen's Church, while the fraternity became a focus for social and cultural life in the

---

[84] Ibid., p. 15.
[85] The cross was copied for Coventry in 1542 so details of the structure are known: it was restored in 1605 and destroyed in the Civil War. Ibid., p. 22; Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays*, pp. 42-57.
[86] Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays*, p. 50. The statues were not described until after the 1605 restoration, which retained the original statues but replaced decayed coats of arms with those of new subscribers.

town.[87] The fraternity continued to be based in and around St. Helen's, occupying the Exchequer Chamber in the church, and acquiring the 'Brotherhood House' in East St. Helen's Street from a prosperous Abingdon benefactor.[88] The annual fraternity feast mixed the spiritual and secular elements of solemn mass, pageant, and feast.[89] The feast was on 3 May, the Day of the Invention of the Cross, and offered several days of excitement for everyone in the town. The feast day included music and May games, and the mass on the next Sunday was followed by a procession through the town.[90] The feast itself was not for the whole community; payment was expected for food and it cost extra for a seat.

Peter Cunich suggests that urban fraternities were the 'social cement' of towns: they were

> an integral part of the fabric of urban life ... and must have given urban dwellers a feeling of pride and security. They were vitally important in establishing local identity and civic values, especially in towns which had not yet been incorporated as boroughs.[91]

It is probable that the fraternity's activities were popular with ordinary townspeople, and may well have engendered a sense of a common urban identity, especially if antagonism towards the abbey persisted in the town. Ordinary townsmen are said to have viewed the new bridges as a focus for communal pride and celebration: a 'rousing rhyme' allegedly composed by a local ironmonger *c.*1450 speaks of 300

---

[87] The Guild maintained a number of chaplains: its proctors, elected by parishioners, had quasi-churchwarden roles. Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 16.
[88] Ibid., p. 21. This was part of the gift of William Dyer, Vicar of Bray, son of an Abingdon tradesman, Richard the Dyer.
[89] Ibid., p. 24. See G. Rosser, 'Urban culture and the church 1300-1540' in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I, 334-70.
[90] Preston, *Christ's Hospital*, p.23. The proximity of May Day celebrations may have had an anarchic effect on the pageant; in 1437 the Bishop of Salisbury banned participants from dressing up as devils.
[91] P. Cunich, 'The dissolution of the chantries', p. 164.

townsmen working together on the project.[92] Francis Little, who wrote his history of the fraternity and its successor Christ's Hospital in the early 1600s, publicized the poem and emphasized the theme of community collaboration at work and at play.[93] It is questionable, however, whether the fraternity made any significant contribution to social unity, to neighbourliness or to fraternal solidarity between men and women of different classes in the town. Whereas the Guild of our Lady and possibly the brotherhood appear to have included relatively humble men and women, needing support in times of poverty, sickness and mortality, the fraternity's membership was drawn from the better sort of men in and outside the town.[94] While the early phase of rebellious, sometimes violent, conflict between abbey and town had involved the developing community, after 1400 the leading officials of the fraternity spoke and acted on the townspeople's behalf. Their respectability and status made their activities acceptable to the abbey. It would be a mistake to overemphasise the collaborative nature of town life, to exaggerate neighbourliness or to hypothesise a fraternal solidarity between men and women of different classes. In some other communities there were annual assemblies for elections, such as Henley-on-Thames where a warden, bailiffs, constables, bridgewardens and churchwardens were elected.[95] In Abingdon there is no evidence either that there was an electoral process for fraternity offices or that membership was anything other than narrow, self-selecting and exclusive.

---

[92] *A Monument of Christian Munificence,* ed. Cobham. For a discussion of the poem see Rosser, 'Urban culture', pp. 346-7.

[93] If Barbour had really given 1000 marks for men's wages they were paid for their work. Preston, *Christ's Hospital*, p. 49.

[94] Ibid., p. 12. Preston describes the Brotherhood as a mutual help society and describes its objects as 'partly religious but mainly secular and utilitarian ... occasionally extended to organized resistance to tolls and exactions by the Abbey'.

[95] C. Dyer 'Small towns 1270-1540', p. 528; 'The importance of small towns', p. 11.

However, it would also be a mistake to assume that the old antagonism between town and abbey was forgotten in late medieval Abingdon. There are indications that the outward respectability of the new fraternity may have concealed anti-monastic elements in the town's society who continued to favour direct action against the abbey's rule in the town. In 1431 there had been an ill-fated attack planned on the abbey by alleged Lollard rebels under the leadership of William Perkins (alias Maundeville, alias Jack Sharp of Wigmoreland), said to be bailiff of Abingdon and a member of the fraternity. Perkins is thought to have been a weaver, and to have had confederates in other localities including Salisbury and London. Trouble had already broken out in Salisbury, and from what is known about the rising it had attracted artisans with politically motivated anti-clerical aims. The rebels had plotted to gather and march to Abingdon from nearby East Hendred, but the rising was a complete failure and Perkins was executed at Abingdon on the day planned for the attack; there is therefore no evidence for significant support either for Lollardy or for direct political action in the town itself. However, there was a 'strong and persistent' Lollard tradition in the Thames valley which had concerned the Bishop of Salisbury in the late 1420s, when he sent a mandate to abbots and archdeacons, including the abbot of Abingdon, to investigate 'persons defamed of heresy and possessing heretical books'.[96] After 1431 there is no further direct evidence linking Abingdon with Lollards, although men and women from surrounding towns and villages were regularly brought before the authorities, including John Whithorn, rector of Letcombe

[96] J.A.F. Thomson, 'Perkins [Maundeville] William', *ODNB,* Oxford 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/25210, accessed 9 Sept 2010]; Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 22; J.A.F. Thomson, *The later Lollards* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 53ff; M. Aston, *Lollards and Reformers* (London, 1984), pp. 31ff. Only one other of eight rebels executed was Abingdon, although a few local men were acquitted.

Basset near Wantage in the early 1500s who was handed over to the bailiff of Abingdon for burning. [97]

Conclusion

By the end of the fifteenth century, therefore, the abbey had given up none of its formal administrative, economic and jurisdictional control. As Knowles said, 'to later eyes the conduct of the monks may seem illiberal and obstructive and even financially unwise, but privileged groups of men, deliberating and voting as a corporate body, have rarely been liberal save upon the brink of a precipice'.[98] However, Abingdon's economic development as a medieval market town had created a more sophisticated social structure with an increasingly independent and able lay leadership. Preston's view was that the fraternity 'had forced itself into recognition as the representative and mouthpiece of the townsfolk and had come to be viewed as a necessary counterpoise to the dominating influence of the abbey'. The fraternity never enjoyed the 'unsanctioned but extensive government by guild' of towns like Reading, Ludlow and King's Lynn, but during the fifteenth century the leading members of Abingdon had successfully gained a degree of informal power and privilege.[99] The dynamic of the relationship between the abbey and the fraternity is not easy to understand, but the fraternity had certainly taken the initiative of quasi-civic leadership in such a way that the abbey appears to have viewed the fraternity's activities with complacency.[100] Kümin pointed out that Abingdon's fraternity was more sophisticated than many in terms of the scope of its charitable activities, and that 'from this point it was only a short way to quasi-municipal status'.[101] The fraternity combined a corporate identity with social exclusivity, and established an elite that largely abandoned conflict and

---

[97] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters', pp. 7ff.
[98] Knowles, *Religious Orders in England,* p. 169.
[99] Tittler, *The Reformation and Towns,* p. 160
[100] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 25.
[101] Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community,* pp. 151-2.

litigation in favour of a working relationship with the abbey. This process enhanced the status of the town's leadership, and, whether intentionally or not, inhibited the collaborative nature of the town community. Leading families were able to promote their economic and social status in the early sixteenth century and this prepared the way for them to take on a formal governing role in the dissolution period.

Chapter 3

Abingdon in the early sixteenth century

Until 1538, when Abingdon abbey was dissolved and destroyed, the town of Abingdon retained its medieval characteristics. We have seen that much of the town's status continued to be rooted in the abbey. However, a relatively wealthy lay society had developed as a result of the town's economic growth. Since 1400 the town's leading men had established a distinctive power-base centred on the Fraternity of the Holy Cross and St. Helen's church. The fraternity had assumed quasi-civic responsibilities by carrying through prestigious projects that had lifted the secular profile of the town. This chapter will look in detail at the economic, social and administrative structure of the early sixteenth century town, with particular attention to the following questions. What were the foundations of Abingdon's prosperity and were there any signs in Abingdon of the economic crisis and decay that some historians have identified in pre-reformation towns? What sort of town was Abingdon and how were the townspeople equipped to cope with the challenges of reformation change in the middle years of the century? In order to answer this second question it will be necessary to ask to what extent the abbey's role as employer, consumer, landlord and administrator remained significant in the early sixteenth century town.

Abingdon's economy in the early sixteenth century

Abingdon is sometimes described as a monastic town, but the late medieval town is perhaps better assessed in economic rather than seignieurial terms. Historians have used many different ranking methods and terminology to describe towns, and it is difficult to define a town like Abingdon, demonstrably urban and located somewhere between major and minor towns in the middle of the urban hierarchy. We have seen

that according to taxation evidence Abingdon was among the wealthiest seventy-five towns in England both in 1334 and in 1524-5. If population and size are considered, Abingdon, with a population well under 2000, can only be ranked as a small town. It has been estimated that on this criterion there were only about 50 large towns, excluding many towns that were regionally important, like Stafford and Lancaster.[1] If status is the main consideration Abingdon could be categorised as a minor provincial settlement or 'primary town'.[2] Its prime geographic location had made it the headquarters of a powerful monastic house, and had encouraged the town's economic development as the main centre of exchange in north Berkshire.

We have seen that historians have found only limited signs of recession in many small towns in the late middle ages. They escaped the problems experienced by some towns at the top of the urban hierarchy that 'relegated them to historiographical doom and gloom'.[3] Abingdon can be counted among the 'hundreds of market towns ... holding their own in this period'.[4] Despite national demographic and economic uncertainty in the fifteenth century, the markets of small towns tended to benefit first from the failure of local village markets and later from growing rural prosperity. Within towns themselves a temporary fall in population gave employment opportunities and put productive land on the market.[5] Abingdon's experience may have been similar to that of Loughborough, where Postles found that 'structural changes in the countryside, together with a greater emphasis on specialisation of production, may have

---

[1] C. Dyer, 'Small towns, 1270-1540', pp. 505-37; Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in early modern Europe,* pp. 1-21.
[2] Everitt ,'The Banburys of England', pp. 28-38.
[3] Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* p. 19.
[4] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns*, p. 32.
[5] R. Britnell, 'The Economy of British towns 1300-1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I (Cambridge, 2000), 313-33.

maintained the town as a centre of exchange and consumption'.[6] If this is the case, it is important to establish whether Abingdon was a typical small urban production and exchange centre of the period.

It has been calculated that in the first half of the sixteenth century there were about 150 towns in the south-east of England, in which the county of Berkshire is included. Most of them had under 1000 inhabitants, with at least half the working population engaged in trades and crafts, and with a local sphere of influence (a hinterland) of between 3 to 6 miles.[7] There was generally a considerable interdependence between town and countryside, although rural crafts and industries supplied goods to country people and urban agricultural production continued. Towns had gardens and orchards as well as open fields and commons, but they also needed incoming food supplies.[8] Food shortages could quickly lead to a local subsistence crisis, but none are recorded in north Berkshire, where there was a buoyant economy based on productive mixed farming.[9] Country people looked to their local town for a variety of goods and services, and in turn the town looked to them for their custom. Typical market town activities included livestock and corn dealing, milling and baking, malting and brewing: Hoskins gives the example of Banbury in Oxfordshire as a town where 'urban character is really dominated by country trades and interests'.[10]

How did pre-dissolution Abingdon fit into this picture? Evidence suggests that Abingdon had a more complex and sophisticated social and commercial life than the

---

[6] Postles, 'An English small town in the later middle ages: Loughborough', pp. 7-29.
[7] C.W. Chalklin, 'South east', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (Cambridge, 2000), 51.
[8] See Glennie and Whyte, 'Towns in an agrarian economy 1540-1700', pp. 167-93, for a full discussion of agricultural production in towns.
[9] J. Dils (ed.), *An Historic Atlas of Berkshire*, p. 38; M. Yates 'Continuity and change in rural society', p. 113.
[10] W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: King Henry's England, 1500-1547* (London, 1976), p. 90.

typical market town. As in most towns agricultural production remained important, and prosperous yeomen lived in as well as around the town, but there was still a clear differentiation between urban and rural life. The focus was on commerce, manufacture and the provision of a wide range of goods and services that were on offer to visitors and travellers as well as to local people. In December 1530 Mr. Wellis, the clerk of the lands at Cardinal's College, Oxford (later Christ Church) recorded three different transactions in Abingdon: he had sold horses at the fair, purchased 'two dozen of parchment' and the stable had paid a saddler 22s 1d.[11] A fifteenth century Fraternity Rent Roll gives some early occupational evidence for a limited sample of Abingdon townspeople: it lists (where the tenants' occupations are given) three glovers, three fullers, two tailors, a dyer, a hatmaker, a barber, a skinner, a cooper, a fletcher, a brewer, a carpenter, a baker, a butcher and a miller.[12] This points to a mix of urban occupations common to many towns, and suggests a predominance of trades connected with cloth and hides. Many urban economies, whether the town made or finished or marketed cloth, had benefited from the boom in cloth exports that lasted well into the sixteenth century.

However, three factors made Abingdon distinctive at this time. Firstly, the town's role as an entrepôt in long-distance inland trading of wool, cloth and grain. Secondly the continuing prestige and patronage of the abbey attracted important visitors to the town, and also ensured the presence of specialist craftsmen and building workers, such as a parchment maker, a plumber and glazier, pewterers, a painter, tilers, masons, and carpenters. Thirdly, the development of a hospitality function in a 'thoroughfare' town provided accommodation and food for people and their horses

---

[11] *LP,* IV, 6788.

[12] CHA, Calendar of Documents 1399-1538, Vol. 2, 821. The Fraternity's rent roll at this time probably included between 10% and 15% of the tenements in the town.

passing through or staying for markets and fairs. The town was able to cope, albeit it with difficulty, with housing the overflow from the unexpected and prolonged visit made by Henry VIII and his court to the abbey in 1518.[13]

Of these three factors by far the most important, not only in terms of Abingdon's economic development but also for the long-term ambitions of its lay society, was its trading function, and this merits a detailed discussion. Abingdon acted as a mercantile crossroads in the centre of southern England. The merchant Richard Cely arranged to meet his woolpacker in Abingdon when he himself was en route from London to Northleach and the woolpacker was travelling north from Southampton.[14] The north-south route became less important in the sixteenth century as Southampton's sea-trade dwindled due to the expansion of the port of London. The Southampton brokage books for 1527-8 give some indication of general commercial activities in Abingdon, showing carts arriving there mainly with fish and wine, but also with garlic, salt, pots and dyes, and returning to Southampton with loads of wool, a similar trading pattern to that in the fifteenth century.[15] The abbey accounts for 1533-4 show the procurement of wine and also of salt by cart from Southampton on three separate occasions, but these show the greater use of the east-west route for wine from Bristol and London, and salt fish (at the price of £62 4s 4d) from London.[16] There is evidence that wine deliveries from Southampton to Abingdon continued well into the sixteenth century. Robert Forman, an Abingdon innholder who died in 1551 had a dispute with a Southampton merchant over a butt of malmsey. The inventory of the

---

[13] *LP*, II, pt.2, 4025, 4030, 4060.
[14] *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488,* ed. A. Hanham (Oxford, 1975), pp. 133-4.
[15] *The Brokage Books of Southampton 1477-8 and 1527-8,* ed. K.F. Stevens and T.E. Olding (Southampton Record Series 28, 1985).
[16] BRO D/EP/7/33.

Southampton merchant Richard Goddard in 1573 included a debt of £10 owed to him by Abingdon's leading vintner, William Kisby.[17]

The bridges built *c.*1420 enhanced Abingdon's long-distance trading opportunities on the major transport route east-west through general trade in hides, livestock and grain, as well as in wool and cloth. The new bridges were said to have attracted trade from Gloucester to London through Abingdon in preference to Wallingford, its old Thames trading rival. At the same period navigation upstream from Abingdon to Oxford was probably abandoned, contributing to Oxford's economic decline in the mid-fifteenth century. The improved route also promoted trade with important local towns, particularly with Henley, which acted as a collection centre for the London grain trade. Purveyance records during the reign of Henry VIII show that the upper Thames area supplied grain to the army and navy.[18] The fifteenth century merchant, John Elmes, owned granaries in Henley and property in Abingdon.[19] More locally, communications with Witney and Burford, towns on the edge of the Cotswolds dominated by the cloth industry, became more important because they were on the main route to Gloucester west of Abingdon. Most importantly, although details of long distance inland trade in general are obscure at this period, it is known that the trade of cloth and provisions to and from London was growing in importance.

There is strong evidence to show that business and family connections between Abingdon and London were already established in the fifteenth century. Richard

---

[17] TNA C/1/847/38; *Southampton Probate Inventories 1447-1575,* ed. E. Roberts and K. Parker (Southampton Record Series, 2 vols., 34-5, 1992), no. 104.
[18] Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', p. 520.
[19] *The Itinerary of John Leland,* ed. Smith, V, 115; *VCH, Oxford,* IV (1979), 35-48; Townley, *Henley on Thames,* p. 35.

Pewterer of Abingdon was in a debt dispute with John Fownder of London in 1453.[20] In 1474 Agnes Farman was violently robbed (with swords, staves, bows and arrows) of two horses, four belts of silk adorned with silver and gold rings, worth £8, and over £3 of cash. She is described as 'wife of John Farman of London haberdasher at Abendon'.[21] Augustine Scarlet, dyer, who paid subsidy in Abingdon in the 1520s, was involved in two Chancery cases against different London dyers.[22] Abingdon merchants are known to have established their sons in business in the capital, sometimes with another son running the family business in Abingdon.[23] James Braybroke's son Richard was based in London when James died in 1509, and was left 20 marks and his house there.[24] When Thomas Mayott drew up his will in 1538, he made a memorandum that 'I have of my brother William Maat in London a karsey'.[25] Richard Braunche, draper, who was Thomas Mayott's overseer in 1538, had a son Thomas who became a successful woollen draper in the City of London, as well as another son William, later a woollen draper and prominent figure in Abingdon.[26] Thomas Braunche was an associate of John Roysse, a London mercer born in Abingdon *c.*1500 who later paid to re-establish the grammar school.[27] The salt fish and wine from London that was supplied to the abbey in the 1530s was purchased from John Stone, who was probably a connection of Thomas Stone of Lechlade and London, and was married to Abbot Pentecost's sister.[28]

---

[20] C. Dyer, 'Small places with large consequences', p. 16.
[21] BRO/D/EP/7/20. The family were still in Abingdon in the 1550s.
[22] TNA C 1/167/12 and C 1/363/33.
[23] Similar links were found between the Brinklow family of Kintbury, near Newbury, and a London branch of the family who were mercers. Yates, *Town and Countryside,* pp. 199-200.
[24] TNA PROB 11/16 (will of James Braybroke, 18 March 1509).
[25] TNA PROB 11/27 (will of Thomas Mayott (Maate), 13 January 1538).
[26] CHA, Calendar of Documents 1399-1538 Vol. 2, 852/3 refers to John Braunch carpenter in Abingdon and his two sons Thomas of Newbury, weaver, and Richard of Abingdon, draper, in 1521.
[27] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 308.
[28] Ibid., p. 202.

It has been claimed that Abingdon's prosperity in the later middle ages was at least partly derived from cloth production and wool and cloth trading, and that these activities were the 'major wealth generators' for the leading townsmen.[29] The only contemporary account of Abingdon is Leland's description in the late 1530s. He had praise for various landmarks, such as the bridges, the market cross and house, and the abbey church, and he noted none of the physical signs of urban economic decline that he found elsewhere. Leland said that 'the town of Abingdon standeth by clothing. The market is quick there'. Although Hoskins pointed out that Leland was often only interested in cloth and markets, these were Leland's chosen indicators of local prosperity.[30] His words suggests that he saw a brisk market for cloth trading, rather than for wool, and that this was more or at least as important as cloth manufacturing.[31] How far can we rely on Leland's assessment?

In common with many market towns Abingdon was probably only lightly industrialized, with cloth and leather production primarily for the local market. Abingdon never produced high quality cloth, unlike the specialised production of Reading and Newbury. But the town both traded and finished cloth woven in rural north Berkshire, although rural production declined around 1500 due to the greater profitability of corn production in the area as a result of the growing demand of the London grain market.[32] Although sixteenth century commercial cloth production in Berkshire was almost entirely concentrated around Reading and Newbury, Christine Jackson argued that Abingdon continued 'to act as a specialist cloth finishing centre' for north Berkshire. For example, Oseney Abbey bought cloth at Abingdon in 1521,

---

[29] Jackson, 'Clothmaking', p. 62.
[30] *The Itinerary of John Leland*, ed. Smith, II, 120-2; Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder*, p. 92.
[31] Jackson, 'Berkshire Woollen Industry', pp. 17f; Jackson, 'Clothmaking and the Economy of Sixteenth Century Abingdon', p. 75.
[32] Jackson, 'Berkshire woollen industry', p. 17; Jackson, 'Clothmaking', pp. 61-2.

probably the ordinary quality grey broadcloth produced in the town according to medieval aulnage records.[33] Her argument is supported by evidence of the operational activities of John Jones, the successful Burford clothier, who also ran a weaving operation in Abingdon. The bequests of his long and complex will made in 1545 include houses, lands, 3 corn mills, several fulling mills, 2 flock mills and a 'gygg' mill, mainly in and around Burford. The will specifies property in Abingdon – a house with a Journeymens Chamber – with seven broadlooms standing in it.[34] Another broadloom 'now in the hands of Will(ia)m Hedges of Abingdon' is listed, as well as £13 13s owed to Roger Cooke (an Abingdon weaver who later married Jones' sister) for work. Jones left money to his apprentices in Abingdon as well as in Burford, in addition to money for the Abingdon poor and for the road from Abingdon to the wharf on the Thames at Culham. The will mentions and is witnessed by several different Abingdon businessmen, including 'my host' Adam Pope, a master of the fraternity. The Abingdon side of Jones' business must have made a considerable impact on the town, and it seems likely that Jones was 'Tuckar of Burford' who bid to lease the abbey's fulling mills after the dissolution.[35]

Other than the evidence of Jones' business the details of cloth-making in Abingdon at this period are obscure, and there is very little occupational evidence before the mid-sixteenth century. Since weavers and fullers continued to work in Abingdon throughout the century we can be sure that they were active throughout the pre-reformation period, although it is not always clear whether they were employed by merchants or independent. Until the middle of the sixteenth century the focus of

---

[33] Jackson, 'Clothmaking', p. 73.
[34] The tenement was in East St. Helen's St., and was rented from the Fraternity at the high rent of 33s 8d.
[35] TNA PROB 11/30 (will of John Jones of Burford, 4 February 1545). See below pp. 140-2.

Abingdon's drapery trade, carried out by many of the leading families in the town, was on commissioning and marketing locally produced cloth. As far as finishing is concerned the abbey steward, John Audlett, was responsible for running the abbey's fulling mill, and the two men who worked for him there in the early 1530s appear to have had their own businesses elsewhere in the town by 1543.[36] There was at least one dyehouse in East St. Helen's street and dyeing remained a specialist occupation in Abingdon until the seventeenth century. Jackson suggests that cloth production stagnated and its role in the town's economy dwindled, because Abingdon's townsmen had too many other economic prospects. In Abingdon the cloth trade was firmly in 'the hands of mercantile capitalists' and did not expand; their interests were in trade rather than production.[37] Alan Dyer found in the case of Stratford-upon-Avon that it was a 'surprisingly difficult' task to understand its economic condition in this period. He too identified, for no obvious reason, a slow decline of cloth-making in Stratford, and considered that it was its function as a market town that determined its economic role.[38] There was no drive in Abingdon to expand cloth production as there was in Newbury and Reading, and the conclusion has to be that townsmen left textile specialisation to an incomer like John Jones, and invested instead in the development of the town's trading, marketing and hospitality functions.

The connections between cloth production and marketing and the local wool trade were complex. Trading in wool was an important part of the north Berkshire economy, involving members of most of the local gentry families. Keith Wrightson points out that 'while the attitudes of the English gentry towards mercantile occupations were somewhat ambivalent' there were often familial links between

---

[36] BRO/D/EP/7/33
[37] Jackson, 'Clothmaking', pp. 72ff.
[38] A. Dyer, 'Crisis and Revolution: Government and Society in Stratford, 1540-1640', p. 85.

merchants and gentry, partly because many leading merchants were landless younger sons of the gentry. In fifteenth and sixteenth century north Berkshire distinctions between gentry and merchants were blurred. John Fettiplace, a third son of the leading North Berkshire gentry family, who died in 1464, had prospered as a citizen and draper of London, and established all four of his sons with Berkshire manors. John Yate, who died in 1509, of Charney and Longworth in north Berkshire, member of another large local gentry family, was a Merchant of the Staple at Calais. Two of his daughters married local gentlemen, two others married respectively a draper of London and a Merchant of the Staple.[39] John Audlett, the wealthy abbey steward who leased the abbey's home manor of Barton, as well as land in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, had an extensive wool business. In 1528 he took a case against a Leamington (Warwickshire) man before the Mayor of the Staple of Westminster, claiming that he was owed £200.[40] His wife Katherine carried on the business until her death in 1539. She had sheep flocks at various manors including Uffington on the Berkshire Downs and Barton.[41] She was involved as his executrix in an action about the price of wool sold at Wittenham, and another court case concerned her sale of wool to a clothier of Trowbridge in Wiltshire.[42]

In Abingdon the emphasis was on manufacturing and marketing cloth, but this did not exclude the possibility of involvement with wool production or of family and business relationships with wool dealers. It is sometimes possible to see how businesses worked, changed, expanded or contracted at an inter-generational level. John Wilmot

---

[39] K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982) p. 28; *The Four Visitations of Berkshire,* ed. W.H. Rylands (Harleian Society, 61, 1907).
[40] TNA C241/282/162.
[41] She left several hundred sheep at Uffington in two of the minor bequests in her will in 1539. TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Katherine Audlett, 14 January 1540).
[42] TNA C1/931/40; BRO D/EP/7/94.

was one of a number of relatively prosperous drapers in Abingdon in the 1520s, and was still in Abingdon in the 1540s. His younger son Edward, however, moved to Witney where he became a very successful wool dealer and a Merchant of the Staple.[43] Edward Wilmot was the last prominent stapler in Witney, and was the town's highest tax payer in 1544; in the same year he had a transaction with the Johnson brothers at Calais worth over £1000.[44] He retained his connections with the Abingdon area, with land at Stadhampton, Chiselhampton and Culham across the Thames in Oxfordshire, and after his death in 1558 his widow married William Bury, a Merchant of the Staple of Calais, and settled at Culham. Richard Wenman, wool stapler and merchant of Witney, the highest Oxfordshire taxpayer in 1524, appears to have had family connections with Abingdon, possibly with the Wilmots. Wenman's mother, Emmott Fermor, left money in 1501 for repairs at St. Helen's church in Abingdon, to Abingdon almspeople and to the new bridge over the Thames at Standlake (Newbridge). Wenman himself left money in his will to improve the highway between Abingdon and Milton, on the road to Thame.[45]

Historians have taken the view that the investment required to control the entire process from raw wool to selling cloth, in other words to be a clothier, was beyond all but the richest merchants.[46] But in Abingdon some townsmen were involved in the wool and cloth trade in at least two if not all of the three stages of production, processing and marketing. They functioned as clothiers, albeit on a small scale, either producing their own fleeces, buying them direct from the farm or in Abingdon and

---

[43] *Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of Witney 1538-1610,* ed. J.L. Bolton, M.M. Maslen (ORS, 54, 1985), lxi.
[44] *VCH Oxford,* XIV, 77-88.
[45] *Some Oxfordshire Wills 1393-1510*, eds. J.R.H. Weaver and A. Bearwood, (ORS, 39, 1958), 1501; TNA PROB 11/12 (will of Dame Emote Fermer, 26 May 1501); *Calendar of the Court Books of Witney,* eds. Bolton and Maslen, p. lx.
[46] M. Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348-1500* (London, 1990), p. 82.

other local markets.[47] Gilbert Freeman (in Abingdon between the 1520s and 1552) was a processor who took action against a local gentleman, Christopher Ashton, for fraudulent evasion of a bargain for the sale of wool because he was unable to fulfil 'bargaynes with dyvars persones for the serve them both of woll and yarne'.[48] The inventory of John Simpson (who was in Abingdon by the 1540s, and died in 1552) includes a warehouse with a beam and weights, and 27 lb. of yarn.[49] His inventory total was high at £77 19s 2d and he was evidently a prosperous yeoman, involved in both livestock and arable farming. The evidence for the pre-reformation period is sparse, but later in the century there is evidence that the town's leading drapers were putting out work to weavers, and there is no reason to think that this was not a well-established practice.[50]

To conclude, there is no reason to doubt Leland's assessment of Abingdon as a well set-up town with a distinctive cloth marketing function. If we also take into account the thriving agricultural and trading economy of the region, it is apparent that the town had a broadly-based economic life and was strongly placed to cope with the stresses it faced in the dissolution period.

Wealth and society in early sixteenth century Abingdon

At a period when documentary evidence is sparse, the 1524-5 Lay Subsidy returns give an opportunity to assess Abingdon's prosperity in comparison with the rest of the county, and also with other towns elsewhere. The 1524-5 taxation records are also

---

[47] Dils, *An Historical Atlas,* p. 52.
[48] TNA REQ/2/2/14. P.J. Bowden, *The Wool Trade of Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1962), pp. 62, 89.
[49] BRO D/A1/212/23 (administration of John Simpson, 30 August 1552).
[50] See p. 264.

provide a detailed source of information about the economic and social structure of the town, especially because they provide a ranking down through the classes to include wage-earners at the bottom of the scale. The first two subsidies of the four granted in 1523, both used below, operated on a sliding scale going up from 4d. in the £ on wages (but only on those earning £1 and over) to 6d. in the £ on goods under £20 in value; and to 1s. in the £ on land and houses, and on goods to the value of £20 and more. These returns are a rich but complex source, which amounts nationally to a survey of people and their wealth: but they have to be questioned over their accuracy in terms of omissions and underestimations. It has been estimated that even when the subsidy was administered efficiently during the reign of Henry VIII, any correlation between subsidy valuation and other assessments of wealth, such as rentals, wills and inventories, is weak. Schofield found that the richer the taxpayer the less likely was his true wealth to be assessed.[51] The subsidy did not assess ecclesiastical wealth, which was significant in many communities. Abingdon's return is further skewed because of the omission of the abbey's wealthy steward, John Audlett, who was assessed separately under the adjacent abbey manor of Barton. Due to his assessment the total payment for Barton was over £50 in 1524, almost as much as Abingdon's payment of £53 12s 10d.[52]

The returns indicate a fall in the national ranking of towns for Abingdon, based on total tax paid, to 71st from 46th in 1334.[53] The result is that Abingdon ranked fourth in Berkshire well below Reading and Newbury and also below Windsor, and more on a

---

[51] R. Schofield, *Taxation under the early Tudors 1485-1547* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 206ff.; R. Hoyle, *Tudor Taxation Records: a Guide for Users* (London, 1994), p. 15.
[52] Audlett was one of the 21 wealthiest men in Berkshire who had to pay the third subsidy in 1527. Dils (ed.), *An Historical Atlas,* pp. 42-3. In the 1540s his heirs, the Reade family of Barton were assessed under Abingdon, see p. 153.
[53] A. Dyer, 'Appendix', *CUH,* 1, 756.

par with small but successful Oxfordshire towns like Witney and Henley-on-Thames. However if Abingdon had included Barton (as it did in 1543) its ranking would have gone up to just below Oxford at 27th. A comparison between the taxpaying population of 1377 and 1524-5 shows overall rising wealth in the county of Berkshire. This was largely due to the increasingly wealthy and populous cloth towns of Reading and Newbury, but their prosperity was shared by other parts of the county, both rural and urban. The most prosperous areas in Berkshire were the valleys of the Kennet and the Ock, and parts of the downs.[54] Reading's ranking had been 38th in 1334 and the town was the tenth richest in England in 1524-5, considered by Leland in *c.*1540 to be the 'best town' of Berkshire.[55] Newbury was around the 20th most prosperous town in England in terms of tax paid in 1334 and 1524-5. In Reading and Newbury textile production was intensive (employing 30% of the working male population fulltime in Reading producing mainly broadcloths and kerseys) and, as at Abingdon, was integrated with distribution that was organised by clothiers, mercers and drapers.[56] Reading was effectively an inland port or entrepôt, like Newbury and Abingdon, and used links with both west and north Berkshire to move goods from and to London and the west of England. In all there were ten Berkshire towns, with Reading ranked first and Wallingford last. It is probably unwise to expect taxation evidence to give more than a general impression of comparables, and Abingdon's ranking in the top 100 towns for wealth in England in the early sixteenth century indicates its relative prosperity.

---

[54] Dyer, *Decline and Growth,* tables in Appendices 1,2,4 and 5, pp. 55-66 with maps on pp.14 and 33. Schofield ranked Berkshire as the sixth wealthiest county for combined lay and clerical wealth in 1515, and the tenth for lay wealth only, as tabulated in 'The distribution of wealth in England', p. 504. Berkshire ranked 16th out of 34 English counties in terms of tax paid in 1524-5, J. Dils (ed), *An Historical Atlas,* pp. 42-3.

[55] *The Itinerary of John Leland,* ed. Smith, I, 109.

[56] Chalklin, 'South-east', *CUH,* II, 53ff.

Despite the caveats mentioned above the taxation assessments are an invaluable source. They may not give totally accurate figures for an individual's wealth, but they give a relative ranking that tells us something about how the taxpayer stood in the eyes of other local men. Richard Langley, for example, paid on assessments of £11 and £35 in the two subsidies, which appear to be an under-assessment in the light of his affluent will in 1535, although he may have become wealthier in the interim.[57] Nevertheless as one of the higher taxpayers in the town his status is correctly indicated. The two Abingdon lists, referred to as 1524 and 1525, give a total of 136 taxpayers' names, including the fraternity as a corporate payer.[58] There are 16 names missing from the second list, and 11 new names. The lists are drawn up in roughly the same order, but in a different hand and with different spellings, making some identifications difficult. The total tax paid was £53 12s 10d in 1524, £46 4s 4d in 1525. The analysis of the 1524 tax list is shown below: [59]

Table 1: Wealth of Abingdon 1524

Assessments	**Persons**	**% of total**	**Aggregate wealth of group**	**Wealth**
£	no.	%	£	%
100 and over	-	-	-	-
40-99	12	9.6	560	49
20-39	7	5.6	200	18
10-19	8[60]	6.4	100	9
5-9	18	14.4	123	11
3-4	14	11.2	49	4
2	35	28	70	6
1	31	24.8	31	3 (i.e. 20s wage earners)
Total	**125**	**100**	**1133**	**100**

[57] TNA PROB 11/25 (will of Richard Langley, 12 September 1535).
[58] TNA E179/73/134 (16 April 1524) and /128 (9 February 1525). I am grateful to Joan Dils for help with these two lists.
[59] To aid comparison with other localities the format is that of the tables in J.C.K. Cornwall, *Wealth and Society in early Sixteenth century England* (London, 1988). Only the 1524 list is analysed here, because the differences between the 1524 and 1525 listings have a negligible effect on the data analysis. In other locations where the difference between the two lists is much larger it has proved logical to add the evidence from the two together, see A. Rosen, 'Economic and social aspects of the history of Winchester', p. 19.
[60] This includes the fraternity, assessed on goods to the value of £11.

Cornwall's generally accepted working model relates these tax bands to occupation, wealth and class as follows:[61]

£100 and over	knights, leading gentry and merchants
£40-99	gentry, richer yeomen, provincial merchants
£20-39	minor gentry, yeomen, lesser merchants
£10-19	skilled craftsmen, larger peasant farmers
£3-9	less skilled craftsmen, peasant farmers
£2	senior servants, lesser craftsmen
£1	artificers, labourers, servants, apprentices

Of the twelve men assessed on goods valued at over £40 only two could be described as gentry. The first was Thomas Braybroke, the head of a local gentry family, had business interests in the town and landed interests in Berkshire. He is typical of the north Berkshire mercantile gentry community, and one of many examples of the phenomenon already mentioned and later noticed by William Harrison, that merchants 'often change estate with gentlemen, as gentlemen do with them'.[62] He is said to have been a clothier and owned a large number of properties in the town. These were still in the hands of his heirs in the 1550s, although by then the family had left the town to live on their country estate at Brightwalton on the Berkshire Downs. His goods were valued at £80, a figure well below that of the wealthiest clothiers in towns like Newbury and Reading. Newbury and Reading were, however, exceptionally wealthy at this time, and in Reading there were at least 6 taxpayers associated with the cloth trade who were assessed on goods over £100 in 1524-5.[63] The second member of the gentry assessed in Abingdon was Christopher Aston (who paid tax on 100 marks). He was a man with a dubious reputation who was later based in the nearby manor of Fyfield as the fourth husband of Lady Katharine Gordon (the widow of Perkin Warbeck) and was not obviously connected with the town thereafter.

---

[61] Cornwall, *Wealth and Society,* p. 19.
[62] See pp. 72-3. *Description of England by William Harrison,* ed. G. Edelen (New York, 1968), p. 115.
[63] Todd, 'Widowhood in a market town', p. 23; Dils, *An Historical Atlas,* p. 50; Jackson, 'Berkshire woollen industry', p. 42.

Of the remaining ten wealthiest townsmen William Bisley (who paid tax on £40) was a member of a family that lived in Abingdon into the seventeenth century, with farming interests, not obviously connected with any trade, never involved in town government and always referred to as 'gentleman'. The Mayott family, later the leading Abingdon family, was represented by Thomas Mayott, draper, (who also paid tax on 100 marks). Thomas left lands at Blewbury to his eldest son in 1537, while his second son Richard stayed in Abingdon as the head of the town's leading family and the first mayor in 1556. Thomas Tonks (who paid tax on £40), was a chandler, and William Trynge (Dringe) was a yeoman farmer and also paid tax on £40. Little is known about the other six, other than that four of them were among the twelve masters of the fraternity in 1520, along with Bisley, Mayott and Tonks.[64]

In terms of status some of these men paying on goods valued at over £40 would fit equally well into Cornwall's £20-£39 group, which might indicate that Abingdon's highest tax-payers were better off than their counterparts in some other towns. On the other hand in the very prosperous towns of Reading and Newbury there were mercers and drapers among the thirteen men assessed on moveable goods to the value of £100 and over.[65] John Audlett, the abbey steward based at the manor of Barton on the north side of the abbey precinct, was the only man in the vicinity of Abingdon to be assessed on goods valued over £100; he was both a member of the local gentry and a wool merchant. He and his wife Katherine bequeathed manors, lands and leases in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire as well as Berkshire in their wills in the 1530s. Despite their spread of interests Abingdon remained their focus; John left money to local churches and asked for burial in the abbey church. Katherine's money bequests

[64] *LP,* III, pt. 1, 612.
[65] Jackson, 'Clothmaking' p. 63.

totalled £512, including over £20 for the repair of local roads. Over £100 was to be disposed for the wealth of her soul at her burial 'in the guild within St. Helen's which I have builded' and then at her month's mind, her twelve month's mind and for 20 years thereafter.[66] She paid for a new aisle to be built at St. Helen's church in 1538, and presumably removed her husband's body there from the abbey church.[67]

Although Abingdon's twelve highest tax payers were nothing like as rich or important as the Audletts, they still account for almost half the wealth of the town. But even if Audlett's assessment had been included in the Abingdon total the town would still have shown a wider spread of wealth and less of the 'gross inequality' that historians have found in other communities.[68] In Witney the wealthy merchant Richard Wenman paid 80% of the total tax paid, £43 out of £55[69]. The much larger town of Coventry shows a far greater gulf between rich and poor than in Abingdon: 60 rich men assessed over £40 (20 of these over £100) account for about 70% of the town's wealth, although Coventry's social stratification was very similar to that of Abingdon's. If Abingdon is compared to Horsham in Sussex, with 108 taxpayers, the results are similar, but in Horsham there were only 5 taxpayers over £40 and the total wealth was only half that of Abingdon's.[70] In Abingdon a middle band of men assessed at between £3 and £39 (which covers three of Cornwall's suggested tax bands) reveals a widely prospering range of 47 craftsmen, merchants and yeomen, accounting for 42% of wealth in the town. Of the seven men that fall into the £20-£39 band, one gentleman, two yeomen, a baker and a glover can be identified. The seven

---

[66] TNA PROB 11/27 (will of John Audlett, 27 March 1537), PROB 11/28 (will of Katherine Audlett, 14 January 1540).
[67] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon* pp. 136-7.
[68] Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* pp. 162ff.
[69] *Calendar of the Court Books of Witney,* eds., Bolton and Maslen, p. liv.
[70] Cornwall, *Wealth and Society,* pp. 62, 54; Phythian-Adams, *Anatomy of a City,* p. 131.

men in the £10-£19 band include two yeomen, two drapers and a grocer. One of these was the above-mentioned Richard Langley, the grocer, who paid tax on an assessment of £11 in 1524 was assessed on £35 in the second subsidy of 1524-5. Langley died in 1535, by which time he was a wealthy man.[71] There were 32 in the group of payers assessed between £3 and £9: in many towns this group was much smaller, which indicates 'a strong contingent of master craftsmen or unusually well-to-do workmen' in Abingdon.[72] Among these men three drapers can be identified, as well as a mercer, a dyer, a fuller, a pewterer, an ironmonger, a saddler, a cutler and a parchment maker. In Worcester only 35% of taxpayers were assessed at £3 and above whereas in Abingdon nearly half were assessed at £3 and above. In general the tax assessments give an impression of a reasonably prosperous and broadly based middling class.

Just over half the tax payers paid on assessments of £2 and under; these servants, labourers and less-well-off craftsmen account for only 9% of the town's wealth. Among them were shoemakers, a slatter, a fuller, a baker and a smith, as well as some (presumably) younger men who later ran successful businesses. John Francis, pewterer, died in 1552 leaving goods valued by inventory of £41 5s 2d, and Richard Large, a chandler, left goods valued at £13 2s 8d in 1558.[73] Gilbert Freeman developed a wool dealing and yarn manufacturing business and was taxed on higher assessments in 1540 and 1543.

---

[71] See p. 85.

[72] Cornwall, *Wealth and Society*, p. 60.

[73] BRO D/A1/5/186 (will of John Fraunces, 10 February 1552); BRO D/A1/201/136 (administration of Richard Large, 25 July 1558). In 1535 Richard Large was named by the wealthy grocer Richard Langley as one of the two feoffees of the mass to be sung for him weekly in the Jesus Chapel at St. Helen's. TNA PROB 11/25 (will of Richard Langley, 12 September 1535).

The only payers assessed on wages were the 31 men paying 4d. on a 20s assessment. Some can be identified as men who remained in the town and later ran their own businesses; a baker, a slatter, a wheeler, a shoemaker and a cutler. One man assessed on wages was Thomas Erle, later a woollen draper, who paid tax in 1543 on a £5 assessment and whose will in 1549 indicated a comfortable lifestyle.[74] This does not mean that all the men assessed on wages were financially secure. We have seen that 16 names were dropped from the 1524 list and 11 new names appeared on the 1525 list. All but four of these were in the £1 and £2 assessment groups, bearing out the theory that some poorer men were only charged in one year or the other.[75] We can guess that many more wage-earners escaped the tax net, both those who were paid less than £1 p.a. and those dependent on casual employment. Ten years later the abbey household payroll for 1534-5, which has survived by chance, shows 13 men out of a total of 35 receiving an annual payment of less than £1. This payment was presumably a stipend on top of perquisites that included board and lodging and livery, but these individuals would not have been eligible to pay tax in 1524-5.[76] Historians have suggested that subsidy lists miss out at least 33% of adult males, largely due to their poverty. On this basis, since 137 men were assessed for tax, there might have been 65 or more men in Abingdon on low or casual wages, or on no wages at all.[77]

The 1524-5 subsidy is the only source for information about ordinary men of the town in employment immediately before the dissolution of the abbey, and the only indicator of population levels until the 1540s. If it is assumed that the 135 taxpayers

---

[74] His bequests included 6 silver spoons, his best gown, his best furred gown and a gown lined with St. Thomas worsted. BRO D/A1/5/72.
[75] A. Dyer, 'Urban decline in England 1377-1525', in T.R. Slater (ed.) *Towns in Decline, AD 100-1600* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 270.
[76] BRO/D/EP/7/33.
[77] Cornwall, *Wealth and Society,* p. 227; Schofield, *Taxation under the early Tudors*, p. 105.

were heads of household in Abingdon, (the 1524 and 1525 totals added together less the fraternity), and we use a multiplier of 6.5, the lay population in 1524-5 may have been about 900 men, women and children.[78] The lay subsidy gives us no useful information about levels of poverty in the town in this period, and while Jackson's speculations that this may have been a problem might be true, there is no way of proving that the town attracted many poor migrants.[79]

The evidence from the lay subsidy of an affluent business community in early sixteenth century Abingdon is confirmed by bequests in early wills of townsmen and women. A house in Ock Street was left in the will of John Lokwoode, mercer, in 1509 to his wife for life and thereafter to the 'brethered'.[80] Roger Mayott, draper, made generous bequests to individuals and religious establishments in his will in 1509: in the event of one of his four sons dying before he received his inheritance, his bequest was to be delivered to the master and wardens of the fraternity.[81] Thomas Humfrey, chandler, left the millhouse in Otwell Lane to the fraternity in his will in 1498: this gift was confirmed in 1523 when his widow Margery added the grant of a house in West St. Helen's Street.[82] Margery Humfrey's sister Avis Biremill of Abingdon left 'draper cloth' in 1509 for an altar cloth for the high altar at St. Helen's: she also bequeathed properties in Wantage and Faringdon to her children, as well as high quality domestic items such as silver spoons and a silver salt.[83] Thomas

---

[78] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth,* p. 31.
[79] Dyer points out the danger in 'assuming that changes in wealth and population are necessarily parallel', ibid., p. 34. Jackson, 'Clothmaking', p. 64.
[80] CHA, Calendar of Documents 1399-1538, Vol. 2, 831.
[81] TNA PROB 11/16 (20 August 1510).
[82] CHA, Calendar of Documents 1399-1538, 800 and 852/3; TNA PROB 11/11/(will of Thomas Humfrey 5 February 1498); PROB 11/21 (will of Margery Hartcourte, 19 June 1523). Thomas' widow Margery's second marriage to James Braybroke, and her daughter Joan Humfrey's marriage to Oliver Wellesborne, bailiff of Abingdon from 1515, moved the family into the ranks of the lesser gentry. Margery's son was Thomas Braybroke, Abingdon's highest taxpayer in 1524/5.
[83] BRO D/A1/1.

Humfrey's brother, Richard Gawnt, was a priest at St. Helen's in 1498 and at the time of his death was Vicar of Sutton Courtenay: he granted a tenement and land in Ock Street to the Chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1519.[84] Christopher Swan, draper, left his house in the Bury to St. Nicholas' church in 1514, subject to a life interest to his wife, in return for a mass to be said for them both every Sunday. Swan was also a grazier, cloth-maker, innholder and yeoman. In 1509 he held the offices of master of the Fraternity, churchwarden of St. Helen's and constable of the town. Preston viewed Swan as 'a fair example of the well-to-do Abingdon trader at the turn of the fifteenth century'.[85] Sir Henry Forty, another Abingdon priest, who died *c.*1527, left no surviving will, but his inventory (totalling £7 13s) includes items that indicate a privileged life-style: three gowns, a featherbed, three silver rings and damask hangings.[86] In 1535 Richard Langley, grocer, listed bequests in his will which included about £250 in money to his wife and children. He also left two tenements he had lately purchased in East St. Helen's Street to the Fraternity and Guild of the Holy Rood, along with 6 acres of land in Oxfordshire, to fund a weekly mass and maintain candles.[87] In 1537 Thomas Mayott, draper, son of the Roger who died in 1509, left bequests to his family totalling £220, in addition to silver salts and goblets, and land at Blewbury in Berkshire and at Culham nearby.[88]

Early sixteenth century Abingdon society, from the evidence available, appears to have been distinguished by a relatively large and prosperous middling class under the leadership of a well-off mercantile class.

---

[84] CHA, Calendar of Documents 1399-1538, 847.
[85] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 80-1.
[86] BRO D/A1/1. Thirty books, a cap press and a 'penhorner' suggest he was a schoolmaster.
[87] TNA PROB 11/25 (will of Richard Langley, 12 September 1535).
[88] TNA PROB 11/27 (will of Thomas Mayott, 13 February 1538).

Abbey and town in the early sixteenth century

It remains to ask what the abbey's function was in the life of the early sixteenth century town. The complex and shifting relationship between abbey and town had been negotiated over more than five hundred years. What had changed in administrative terms, to what extent was Abingdon's society and economy affected by the presence and patronage of the abbey, and how important was its property-owning role?

There has been much historical debate about the state of religious houses in England in the years before the dissolution period. There is probably some truth in claims that monasteries had become disconnected from lay religious life, and that some Benedictine monasteries were by then 'a kind of gentlemen's club'.[89] But this did not preclude monasteries from the provision of intercession and alms for the well-being of the community, although there is no way of knowing how valued this provision was by the general population. At Roche Abbey in Yorkshire, although most people did not seek burial in the abbey church, they were found to be more likely to use the abbey as a source for intercession.[90] MacCulloch found that in Suffolk religious houses were not noticeably in decline, although they were not 'spiritual power houses' either. The question of how religious houses looked after their properties and tenants has become part of the historiographical debate about monastic decline. MacCulloch disagreed with Gottfried's views on the poor state of Bury St. Edmund's abbey, showing that the last abbot promoted the interests of his house 'vigorously'. It

---

[89] D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 171.
[90] C. Cross, 'Monasteries and Society in sixteenth century Yorkshire: the last years of Roche abbey', in J. Burton and K. Stöber (eds.), *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 230-1.

was later recalled in the town that 'many of the inhabitants ... had grieved at some speeches of the last abbot ... he said he was lord and king within the said town'. Gottfried's pessimistic view was that by the 1530s in Bury St. Edmunds the abbey had 'slipped into a passive rentier status', now owning less than half the tenements in the town, and needed 'only a gentle push to topple its tottering frame'.[91] Dobson, however, found in his survey of York, Durham and Carlisle that relaxed rather than exploitative management was preferable to urban tenants of ecclesiastical landlords, and indicative of a good relationship between them.[92] On the whole past generalisations about their decay and decline have proved to be overly based on Tudor government propaganda, and the real situation was much more variable.[93]

Not a great deal is known about the general state of Abingdon abbey at this time. On paper the abbey had great wealth. The net annual value of spiritualities and temporalities was formally assessed in 1535, when the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was drawn up to value church property, at £1,876 10s 9d. Only 24 out of 553 monastic houses had an income of over £1000 p.a. and Abingdon was the sixth most wealthy monastic house in England.[94] Despite this the abbey had been in financial difficulties since before 1400.[95] Building projects (such as the Abbey Gateway *c.*1450) had continued, although probably not into the sixteenth century.[96] The number of monks had stabilised at below 40 by 1350 and by 1538 there were only 27, including the

---

[91] Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds,* pp. 215, 236, 243-5; MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors,* pp. 133ff.
[92] R.B. Dobson, 'Cathedral Chapters and Cathedral Cities: York, Durham and Carlisle in the fifteenth century', *Northern History,* 19 (1983), 37.
[93] Cunich, 'The dissolutions and their aftermath', p. 223.
[94] *Valor Ecclesiasticus temp. Henry VIII auctoritate regie institutus,* ed. J. Caley (Record Society, 1810-34) ii, 155-7; Hoskins, *Age of Plunder,* p. 128.
[95] As major landowners the abbey would have suffered from declining rents and higher wage costs in the fourteenth century. Manors are said to have been leased out 'to the impoverishment of the house'. Cox, *Medieval Abingdon,* p. 111.
[96] *Two Cartularies,* eds. Lambrick and Slade, II, lviii-lxii, discusses the abbey's later history. The destruction of almost all of the abbey site makes dating impossible, but Leland stated that much of the abbey church had been rebuilt in the fifteenth century. *Leland's Itinerary,* ed. Smith, I, 121.

abbot, prior and sub-prior. The abbot's lodgings continued to be available for royal visitors, with a king's and queen's chamber, presumably used by Henry VIII in 1518.[97] The abbey would have regularly received lay visitors on both a social and a spiritual basis but, unlike Reading or Walsingham, Abingdon did not attract pilgrims.[98] The abbots could be as important and influential in national politics as any temporal lord, depending on their abilities and inclinations. Abbot Sante (1468-1496) was a Yorkist royal ambassador and papal nuncio, his successor Thomas Rowland (1496-1504) was a nominee and adviser of Henry VII.[99] The last abbot, Thomas Pentecost (1512-38) appears to have been loyal to the crown in an uneventful political career.

In Abingdon the abbey maintained its formal administrative role in the town: the kitchener continued to run markets and fairs through the portmote court and customary rents were paid to bailiffs at the hall-mote.[100] As a result the abbey was, at a distance, landlord to the majority of townspeople. Despite its over-arching patriarchal role in the town, and its apparent control of so many aspects of town life, it is not easy to identify the nature of the abbey's relationship with the town's leadership. The growing social, economic and cultural status and influence of the town's elite, deeply identified with St. Helen's Church and the fraternity, has already been described. The fraternity, not the abbey, had petitioned the House of Commons for the bridge building project in the fifteenth century, and had petitioned the king for the new St. Andrew's Fair in 1520.[101] We have also seen that antagonism had largely

---

[97] See the description of the abbey precinct in the Amyce Survey, ff.211-2, and Preston's discussion, BRO D/EP7/36.
[98] Cornwall viewed these towns as specialist tourist centres, *Wealth and Society,* p. 57.
[99] Cox, *Medieval Abingdon,* pp. 102-111.
[100] *Two Cartularies,* eds. Lambrick and Slade, II, xxxvi-vii.
[101] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 14, 25.

ceased to characterise the institutional relationship between abbey and townsmen, which in the early 1500s appears to have been amicable. The evolution of the fraternity in the early 1400s separated out the great and the good in the town from the rest, and conferred on them respectability and status in which the abbey could feel confidence. By 1500, if not long before, townsmen were involved in administration as town constables, and deeds show them witnessing deeds and grants. They were members of leading families: six out of the nine recorded between 1507 and 1519 were in the highest tax-paying groups in 1524-5, paying on goods valued at over £20.[102] Later the claim would be made that the townsmen had run their affairs 'from time out of mind'. It was emphasised that the townsmen had customary rights as follows: to have lawdays that were separate from the Hormer hundred, and watch and ward within the town, to pay scot and lot, and to take the office of constable, as well as 'to bear and execute all manner of offices when thereunto elected and chosen'.[103] It seems most unlikely that the townsmen considered that they were running their own affairs, since the abbey continued to choose bailiffs for the town and collect rents and revenues. However, those townsmen who held offices whether connected with the town, church or fraternity administration had developed a considerable degree of organisational independence by the early sixteenth century, and the abbey's acquiescence in this could be viewed as pragmatic rather than weak.[104]

The dynamics of the abbey's social and cultural relationship with the town are equally obscure. Two institutions, both near the abbey gateway, continued to act as points of contact. St. John's hospital was both an almonry and an almshouse, through which

---

[102] CHA, Calendar of Documents 1399-1538, Vol. 2, records a number of different leading townsmen witnessing deeds and grants in the official capacity of constable.
[103] BRO D/EP7 (AEP A(2)). These remarks are in memoranda made by Roger Amyce *c.*1554. I am grateful to Dr. Manfred Brod for this reference.
[104] *VCH, Berks,* IV, 430-51.

the abbey still contributed to general poor relief. The grammar school had been established for many years and was run from *c.*1504 until the dissolution by a monk, the third prior. It taught sons of local gentry and merchants, and probably the occasional poor scholar.[105] Social and pastoral contacts were probably at a gentry level, with men like Oliver Wellesbourne, who was appointed bailiff by 1515 and remained in post into the 1540s. He was a gentleman based in the countryside at Hanney, connected to the Abingdon elite through his marriage to the daughter of an Abingdon chandler and as Thomas Braybroke's step-brother-in-law. Prominent local people were buried in the abbey church, both members of the local gentry, like Sir Thomas Fettiplace in 1523 and John Audlett in 1538, and leading townspeople, like the Mayotts and the Braybrokes, whose interests and connections took them into county society. The prestige of burial in the abbey may have been closed or unattractive to other members of the town elite, who usually opted for burial within the town's parish churches (the majority of townspeople were still obliged to use the abbey cemetery).[106] Surviving pre-reformation wills demonstrate the strong relationship between the laity and their parish churches, and only one townsperson gave a legacy to the abbey.[107] In 1509 James Braybroke had a tomb 'made' for him in the abbey church, but he left £6 for a priest to sing for him at St. Katherine's altar at St. Helen's for a year. He also left 6d to every person of both almshouses, and 20s for the building of the old almshouse. Presumably he made these bequests for the good of his soul; it is fair to say that the abbey did not play any great part in how he wanted

---

[105] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 289.

[106] Richard Langley in 1535 specified the Jesus Chapel before the image of Jesus in St. Helen's, TNA PROB 11/25 (12 September 1535); Oliver Smith in 1518 asked for burial in the Chancel of St. Peter, TNA PROB 11/19 (11 June 1518).

[107] James Braybroke's widow Margery bequeathed a 'chalice with a corporas' to the chapel of Our Lady within the monastery, where she planned to be buried with her late husband, the second of three, TNA PROB 11/21 (will of Margery Hartcourte, 19 June 1523).

to be remembered.[108] Similarly although in the same year Roger Mayott asked for burial in the 'church of the monastery' beside his late wife, he left money to a number of local churches, arranged for masses in both Abingdon churches and also paid the 'four orders of friars in Oxford' for a trentall of masses at 10s per order. His legacy to the poor was in return for prayer, particularly from four poor men 'to hold torches at my burying and at my months mind to each of them a black gown a hood and a reward in money'.[109] Despite the more prestigious destination of their earthly bodies, Braybroke and Mayott's spiritual concerns and needs were met in the churches where they had worshipped.

The economic relationship between abbey and town was partly that of consumer and supplier. A significant number of townspeople must have been at least partly dependent on payment for the supply of labour, goods or services to the abbey. Very little evidence survives for the day-to-day running of the abbey, other than accounts relating to the audit of Audlett's stewardship in 1534-5.[110] The accounts survive as part of the royal investigation into the long-running dispute which followed the abbot's dismissal of Audlett in 1534 for embezzlement. Audlett was reinstated in 1536, as were the leases of manors he held from the abbey, when he offered to settle the dispute with the payment of £2,500. Some of the paperwork prepared for the case throws a light on how the abbey's internal economy impinged upon the town. In that year the abbey purchased wheat and malt from eleven different local men, including John Audlett and also from the market, at a total of about £200 in all. Purchases of salt fish, salt and wine from sources further afield that bypassed the town's market have already been mentioned, at a total of about £90. The accounts of other abbeys

[108] TNA PROB 11/16 (will of James Braybroke, 28 March 1509).
[109] TNA PROB 11/16 (will of Roger Mayott, 20 August 1510).
[110] TNA SP5/4/18-26; TNA SP1/88/116; BRO/D/EP/7/33; *LP*, VII, 1676.

such as Battle and Pershore make it clear that they too went to specialist traders outside the town in order to buy in bulk.[111] The abbey made hay in its water meadows, and it appears to have been self-sufficient in supplies of home-produced meat, vines, fruit, nuts and fish (from the fishpond), with any surplus sold. Audlett was accused of withholding income from sales over a number of years of hides and fells (£97 5s) and tallow (£178 13s 5d).[112] The abbey malt makers deposed that he had saved £34 over 7 years because they had made his malt for nothing, when they should have charged him 6d a quarter. It is clear from the Audlett audit that the abbey's role in the town's economy went well beyond employment and consumption. The abbey household was expecting an income from malt-making and animal by-products. The abbey fulling mills were obviously still operative because it was claimed that he had pocketed the profits of the fulling mill (£33 6s 8d) over the four years between 1531-4. The abbey profited directly from visitors through its own inn, the *novum hospitium,* in the market square.

Audlett had claimed over £50 in 1533-4 for payment of the household annual wages, including £16 19s for 'livery gowns and coats against Christmas'.[113] Forty names are listed, starting in order of precedence with four gentlemen, one of them Audlett himself. Most of them received 15s or £1, and this was probably a stipend in addition to board and lodging. The lowest paid were the pudding wife on 6s and several men on 15s without livery, and the highest paid was Sander, faggotmaker, with £3. Higher up the list are more important men, some of whom were probably receiving a retainer of some sort rather than a wage: some of Abingdon's leading men, William Wikes

---

[111]. C. Dyer, 'Small places with large consequences', p. 15; Dobson, 'Cathedral Chapters and Cathedral Cities'. p. 35.
[112] The tallow was 'delivered to divers tallow chandlers who served the monastery for white lights'.
[113] See Appendix 2.

and John Shene, innholders, and John Wilmot, draper, are among them. Three of the abbot's servants, Broughton, Coke and Gunnell, were members of local yeoman families. Lower down the list are a mixture of agricultural and craft workers, mostly with occupational names or designations based on what they did in the household:

Cook	1	Woodman	1
Faggotmaker	1	Brewer	3
Baker	1	Carter	4
Slaughterman	2	Cooper	1
Warrener	1	Maltster	2
Pudding wife	1	Horseman	1

Most of these men were probably full-time employees, and hardly represent a significant proportion of the town's population, especially because the agricultural workers probably lived at Barton. However, the abbey was like any great household in its requirements of goods and services, and these must have been both regularly and casually supplied by a variety of townspeople. Audlett's list is not necessarily comprehensive, because other servants may have been paid by obedientiaries or privately by monks. Harvey suggests that the ratio of monks to employees might generally have been one to at least two.[114]

The landlord-tenant relationship was possibly the most important point of contact between the abbey and many townsmen. Properties were held from the abbey in a variety of ways: while some members of the elite held freeholds, and a few agricultural holdings were copyholds, most ordinary townspeople were tenants 'at will'. An Abingdon freeholder had an arms-length relationship with his landlord. To all intents and purposes he owned his property; he paid a fixed and often nominal

[114] B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977), p. 153.

annual rent (which could be as little as a few pence), he had security of tenure, he could sub-let, and was liable for his own repairs. Tenants 'at will' were customary tenants who paid a fixed rent by the quarter, had no sure security of tenure but could leave when they wished, and no liability for or control over repairs. In practice some tenancies were passed from one member of a family to another, and some tenants moved from one property to another. These properties generally commanded low rents, and were themselves low-grade. There was a moral obligation, but no financial incentive, for the landlord to improve a property held 'at will' with no prospect of a rent increase.[115] The cash rents for all categories of property indicate that late medieval tenure in Abingdon may have been more akin to burgage tenure than manorial tenure, as is typically found in towns with minimal political development.[116]

The details of pre-reformation property distribution can be extracted from the Amyce Survey, made in 1554 in advance of the town's incorporation. This remarkably detailed source will be discussed in its context in a later chapter. The listing of individual properties shows their pre-dissolution ownership.[117] Abingdon abbey's most important town property was its own site: this is described in an addition to the survey which gives the text of various tenancies granted by letters patent after the dissolution.[118] However, as in other towns subordinated to monastic lordship, the abbey held, in addition to the precinct reserved to its own use, a large proportion of other landed property in the town. The history of the abbey's property holdings in

---

[115] After the 1550s leases became common in Abingdon for the better-off tenants at will and this proved to be a mechanism for both the new Corporation and for Christ's Hospital to raise rents and transfer responsibility for repairs. See below pp. 222ff.

[116] D.M. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth,* p.256. For a discussion on the urban nature of Abingdon medieval tenancies see *Two Cartularies,* eds. Lambrick and Slade, II, xxvii-xxviii.

[117] This is supplemented by accounts produced by ministers appointed by the Court of Augmentations, relating to former abbey properties only. BRO/D/EP7/38 (transcription of Minister's Account Henry VIII No.109 (1538) and Bodleian ms. Berks Roll 9 (1546-7) and Roll 10 (1547-8). See BRO/ D/EP/33 for transcriptions of Chantry rentals in 1548. See pp. 35-8.

[118] Amyce Survey ff.211-214.

Abingdon is obscure, but it seems likely that all Abingdon properties were originally held from the abbey. In one deed it is recorded that 'the abbot stated that the abbot had been the lord of the vill of Abingdon from time immemorial'.[119] The vill of Abingdon had been in the charge of an obedientiary, the abbey kitchener, since the early twelfth century; the situation had become confused subsequently with some rents granted to other obedientiaries. Thirteenth century deeds recorded in the cartularies indicate that at that period a policy decision was made by the abbey to acquire properties and rents in the town, either through gift or purchase. This process was probably one of recovery of property and assertion of rights: there had been piecemeal alienation of landed property from the abbey throughout all its estates in the early middle ages.[120]

The Amyce Survey, together with the post-dissolution Minister's Accounts, confirms the continuation of the abbey's policy to retain a large proportion of property in the town. According to the survey, at the time of the dissolution the abbey had been in receipt of rents from at least 320 properties out of the total listing of 445 (72%), while the tenants of the rest of the properties (28%) owed rent to other religious bodies, mainly to the Fraternity of the Holy Cross. This is complicated by evidence from the first Minister's Account in 1538 that the abbey also received quitrents from the Fraternity and from the 'Priest of the Blessed Mary' (the Guild of Our Lady, also called the chantry) for an unknown number of properties. According to this account the abbey received rent for a total of 229 tenancies 'at will'; in addition 38 individual quitrents were payable, as well as quitrents for an unspecified number of properties

---

[119] *Two Cartularies,* eds. Lambrick and Slade, II, xxix-x and I, 310 (L.506 dated 1363). The Chatsworth and Lyle Cartularies include a large number of deeds concerning messuages in Abingdon.
[120] Ibid.I, xxvi ff.

held by institutions and three wealthy individuals.[121] A total of 57 of the payments for tenancies 'at will' (and for 2 of the quitrents) were for non-residential property: these were outside the town centre and were mainly gardens but also barns, stables, agricultural land, empty plots and orchards.[122] The Minister's Account shows that, as a minimum, 150 Abingdon individuals were tenants 'at will' of the abbey. They, and to a lesser extent, the 25 individuals who held their freeholds directly from the abbey, had a vested interest in and concern about the day to day running of the abbey's business affairs.

As Fig. 7 below shows, properties held directly from the abbey were scattered across the town, and outnumbered those held from other religious bodies in almost all areas of the town.[123] In the Bury where the most valuable properties in the town were situated the abbey's influence had been permanently eroded. Although many of the tenants in this area paid high rents to the abbey, just over a third of the 60 properties were held from the guild (or chantry) or the fraternity. By contrast, in Stert Street and Burford Street, which ran along the abbey precinct walls, the abbey had direct control of all but one of over 60 properties, and had granted only a few freeholds. This may have been viewed as a security measure, perhaps going back to the attack on the abbey buildings in 1327, but it seems likely that the Stert properties on the east side of the street were an infilling development of mainly low-grade properties between the Stert stream (which ran down the middle of street) and the abbey wall. This side of

---

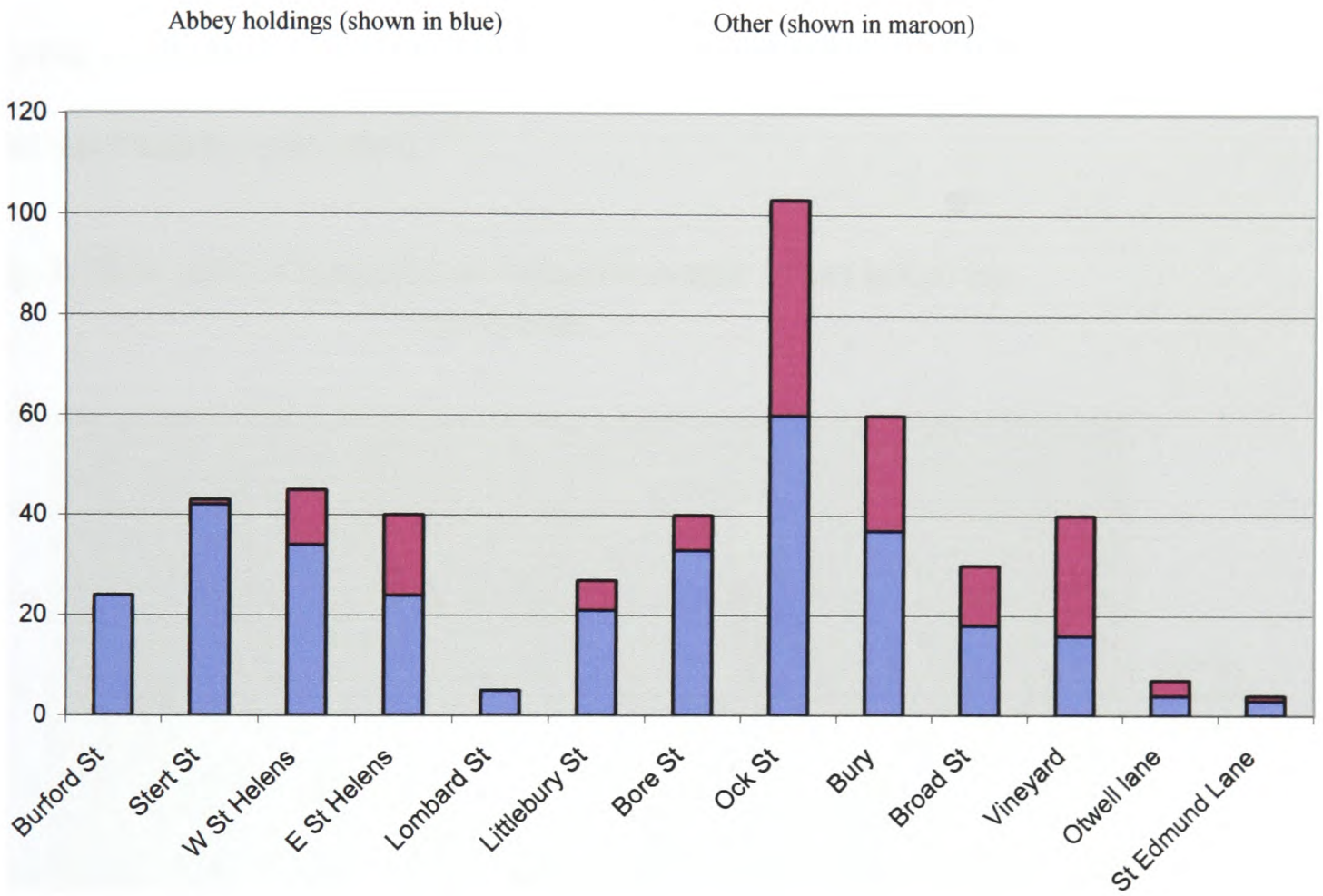
[121] An attempt to extract a list of pre-1538 freeholds on former abbey properties gives a possible total of 56 (not counting the fraternity and guild of St. Mary holdings). This is 35 less than the 320 totalled in Amyce, but the Account does not include various 'farms' and Amyce attributes more properties to abbey ownership than the Minister's Account.

[122] There are small discrepancies between various listings and the total number of properties in the various Accounts and in Amyce differs slightly.

[123] This is based on the historic information given in the Amyce Survey and includes every type of property that is listed.

the Stert was in St. Nicholas' parish, and it is possible that the housing was originally for abbey servants and dependents. The properties on the east side of Burford Street had also been developed by the abbey at an unknown date; the area was also called Butcherrow, and mostly accommodated lower-grade shops for butchers.

Fig. 7: Abingdon properties in 1538.

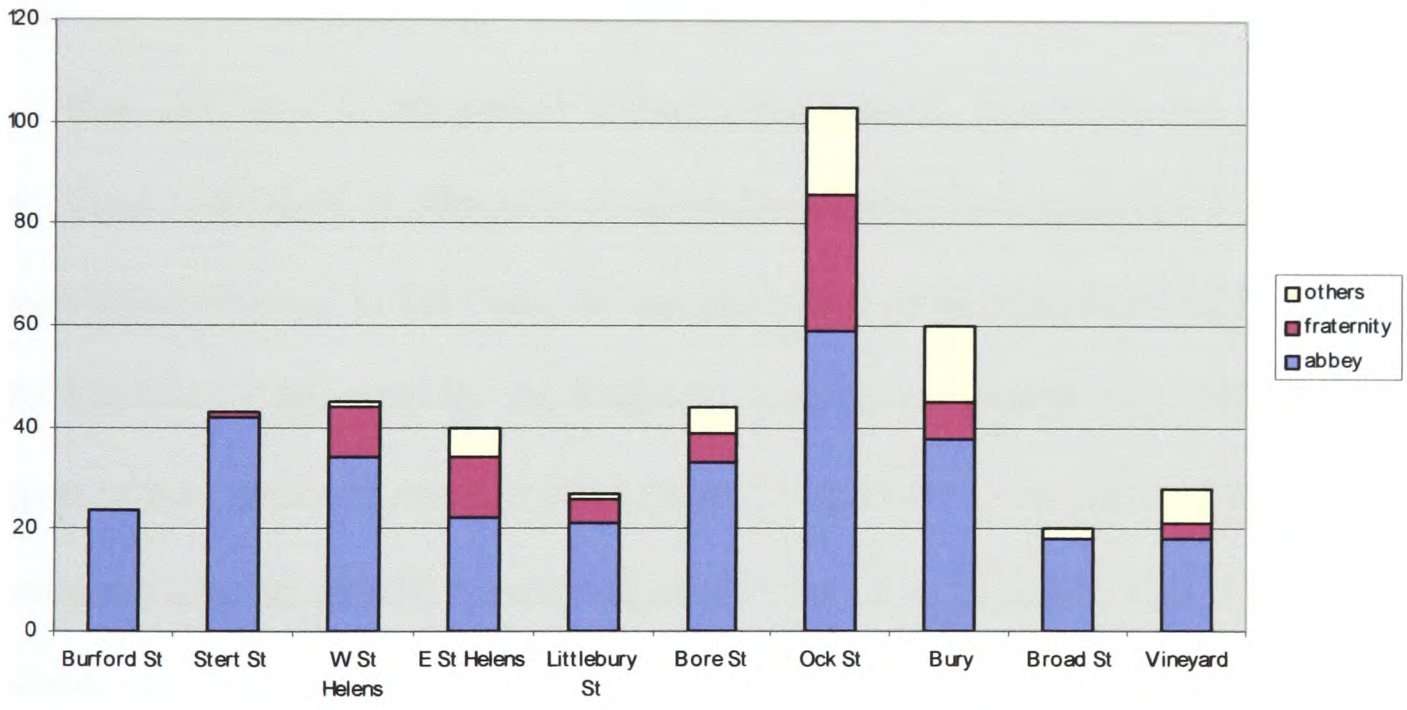


The abbey had clearly wished to maintain control of as much property as possible in the town, but it had tolerated, or was unable to prevent, gifts or acquisitions of freeholds for the endowment of various local ecclesiastical institutions.[124] As far as can be told there were about 125 such properties that were not under the abbey's control, representing just over a quarter of the tenements in the town. Most of these were held by the two town guilds, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross (16% of all

[124] For example, one of the major Fraternity benefactors, a William Dyer vicar of Bray, son of Richard the Dyer of Abingdon, settled properties including purchased Abingdon tenements on the Fraternity before 1440. Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 21.

holdings) and the Guild, or Chantry, of Our Lady (also referred to as the Chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary or St. Mary's Chantry). These were the only guilds known to have been operational in Abingdon, although St. Toll's Chantry in St. Aldates', Oxford received rents from seven outlying properties in Bore Street and the Vineyard.[125] Seven other properties benefited St. Nicholas' and St. Helen's churches.[126] Fig. 8 below shows a breakdown of the distribution of property holdings in 1538 (excluding three minor lanes) between those held directly from the abbey, from the fraternity and others.[127]

Fig. 8: Distribution of properties in Abingdon's major streets before the dissolution



In the town the fraternity held 73 properties, of which all but six were tenanted 'at will'. Its influence was less strong in areas like the Bury, Stert Street and Burford Street where it seems likely that development had been carefully controlled by the

[125] Two were in Bore Street, and four were in the Vineyard.

[126] A transcription of the rental of Our Lady in 1548 in BRO D/EP/33 includes these properties. Six properties appear under the heading 'obite lands' and these were identified as such in the Amyce Survey. In addition the high rent of 40s for the Bell in the Bury had been given to 'the maintenance of priest to sing' at St. Nicholas in 1514. Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 80-81.

[127] There are some discrepancies between the various different fraternity and chantry listings which cannot be entirely reconciled with the Amyce Survey. There are confusions about the number of chantry properties, about locations, and some properties are split or put together, so all totals should be taken as approximate.

abbey. In the Bury, for example, there was a row of four properties held 'at will' from the abbey by leading men of the town, each paying a high rent of 26s 8d, in 1538. These properties encroached on the original market place and are described as 'the new row' in the survey, indicating that the abbey had continued to develop its property in the town. The table above shows that the fraternity property holdings in the town are concentrated towards the west end, furthest away from the abbey precinct. It is not unexpected that there was a cluster of fraternity properties in the streets of East and West St. Helen's close to St. Helen's church. This was an area of the town that might originally have developed independently of the abbey, and where there is a possibility that the fraternity themselves may have developed or redeveloped property.[128] The fraternity also held 22 properties in Ock Street, which supports the view that this area of piecemeal ribbon development, semi-industrial and semi-agricultural, was more important to local craftsmen and tradesmen than to the abbey.

Shown under 'others' in the chart are the properties of the Guild of Our Lady. The guild had been supplanted by the fraternity, and its purpose became limited to the support of the fabric and services of St. Helen's Church.[129] The value of its lands and possessions totalled £10 18s 8d at its dissolution; the rentals shown total £7 p.a. for 15 properties in various streets in the town which equated to the £7 p.a. due to the chantry priest.[130]

This evidence shows that Abingdon abbey had retained a large proportion of tenanted property in the town, despite lay religious institutional encroachment. It was not unusual for religious houses to be major urban landlords: in Bury St. Edmunds it has

---

[128] Rodwell, *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire,* p. 34. Amyce describes six former Fraternity tenements without gardens lying together that could be a low-grade infill development into what may have been a more open area opposite St. Helen's Church.
[129] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 16-17.
[130] BRO D/EP/33.

been calculated that 70% of townsmen lived in abbey properties.[131] It is significant that some of the best commercial properties, particularly in the Bury but also in East St. Helen's and Ock Street, had been effectively alienated either to lay religious institutions or to freeholders. Conversely the areas where the abbey's control was strongest included some of the poorest property in the Stert, the Vineyard and Burford Street. This pattern of property holding had probably come about over many years, and while it may reflect past anxieties about the security of the precinct, also shows that the abbey had largely abandoned its interests in the town's economic development. It is also possible that, whether through lack of interest, mismanagement, lack of returns or shortage of funds, the abbey might have ceased to invest in its commercial and residential properties. This argument can only remain hypothetical, but remarks made by Sir Richard Rich, the solicitor general, to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister in February 1538, immediately after the monastery's surrender, refer to ruin and decay both in the monastery and in the town. The issue of decay will be discussed in greater detail in the context of Abingdon's post-dissolution economy, but there is no conclusive evidence as to whether monastic property in the town was in a poor state or not.

The dispute between the abbot and Audlett in 1534-5 certainly reveals evidence of an administration lacking in control and efficiency. The accounts show that the abbot had spent over £130 of the monastery's money on his sister's dowry. It was alleged that Audlett's embezzling and swindling had gone on for over twenty years: the royal auditors backed the abbot in his claims against Audlett, but disallowed various 'deceitful allowances' on the basis that the monastery auditors had agreed them year

[131] Tittler, *Reformation and the Towns,* p. 61.

after year.[132] By the 1530s the abbey administration may have been increasingly distracted by the threat of suppression. The sum of £400 had been spent on 'divers urgent causes concerning the said monastery' in London before 1534-5.[133] There are a number of other indications that the abbey, without abandoning its interests in the town, had increasingly been taking a back seat role in its affairs. Passive policies that first emerged when the fraternity was allowed to take economic and symbolic initiatives in the fifteenth century, had continued with leading townsmen taking a more prominent part in government. This was in contrast to other communities where 'jurisdictional squabbles' had not abated.[134] Does the fact that relations between the town and the abbey had settled into a tolerant *status quo* mean that the townspeople no longer felt that the abbey's government was restrictive? It is hard to believe that the old tensions between the two had totally dissipated, or that the town's leaders did not want to correct what was now a marked imbalance between informal and formal power. While it seems possible that the suppression of the abbey may have completed a long process of its disengagement from the affairs of the town, it still remained a force to be reckoned with and retained an involvement to differing degrees in every aspect of the life of the town.

Conclusion

We have seen that Abingdon's economy and society flourished independently of the abbey in the early sixteenth century. Its leadership had developed quasi-civic roles to the extent that it was potentially equipped for a transition to local autonomous government. However, it is also clear that the abbey was integrated in different ways

---

[132] See pp. 91-2. D/EP/7/33.
[133] Preston, *St. Nicholas* pp. 73, 141. The payments were to Charles, Duke of Suffolk, Sir William Compton and Sir Ralph Egerton and were possibly related to negotiations about the abbey's future.
[134] Tittler, *Reformation and the Towns,* p. 61.

in every aspect of town life, and that its operational significance in the pre-dissolution town has to be acknowledged. The identity of the town was also strongly linked with the national profile of the abbey. Despite the strengths of Abingdon's economic and social structure, the hiatus that the dissolution brought in terms of administration, property ownership, employment and status was to be a potent threat to the town's stability.

Chapter 4

The dissolution period and the transfer of administration

The dissolution period in Abingdon provided a dramatic finale to the six hundred years long monastic era in the town's history. The destruction of the abbey and the subsequent dissolution of the town's fraternity and chantry were a trigger for changes of all kinds, both positive and negative. The two previous chapters of this thesis have shown how the lay community of Abingdon had moved from dependence on the abbey to a partial independence that was largely vested in the activities of the fraternity. Although in some respects its role was diminished, the abbey had continued to play a part in the town's government, society and economy, as well as in its cultural and religious life and landscape. There was a structural imbalance between informal and formal power holding that had showed little sign of resolution before the dissolution period. Abingdon's pre-reformation lay leaders had been poised for governmental change for some time, but we shall see that the seismic and uncertain upheavals of the dissolutions pivoted them into an unexpected scenario of problems and challenges. How could the town be stabilised? How would they be placed once the dust settled and what advantage could they salvage?

Reformation change, and the dissolutions in particular, had implications for Abingdon that lead to a number of different lines of enquiry. These bring us to historiographical themes introduced in the first chapter of this thesis. The dissolutions have been viewed as the cause of disruption, discontinuity and loss in urban societies. The examination of instability in urban communities during the reformation has often focussed upon either the importance of economic consequences, in the context of the theme of urban decay, or on the effects of cultural and religious change. In contrast

Tittler's more institutionally based approach emphasises the 'enormous void' caused by changes in governing authority, and suggests two main themes. Firstly a transfer of all sorts of property and jurisdiction, and secondly the abolition of 'much of the medieval form of Christian belief, and with it the institutions both lay and clerical which had evolved to serve that belief'.[1] All these aspects will be fully discussed in the chapters that follow as part of a broad and synthesised approach to Abingdon's post-reformation urban experience.

Abingdon, as did every town, had its own individual nature, story and situation. The reformation had complex impacts on towns, both positive and negative, varying according to the 'sharp distinctions amongst urban types'. Tittler argues for a greater awareness of these distinctions: 'against the more familiar picture of catastrophe ... we must begin to hold up the substantially more beneficial results which accrued in those communities better able to cope'.[2] The necessity for administrative restructuring is an important factor in assessing the impact of the reformation on an urban community. This chapter will examine the impact and substance of administrative changes in Abingdon in and after 1538. What were the threats to the town's urban status or to the independent development of its trading community? Who were the prime movers in the administrative and social reconstruction that was to be initiated by the incorporations in the 1550s? To argue that a community 'coped' could suggest either active or passive participation in pursuing policies and shaping change. Is it realistic to view the townsmen of Abingdon as proactive rather than merely reactive to the imposition of decisions taken at a higher and external level? The first task is to find out what the dissolution period meant for the town of

---

[1] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 45-6.
[2] Collinson and Craig, *The Reformation in English Towns,* pp. 3ff.; R. Tittler, 'Reformation, Resources and Authority: an overview', in Collinson and Craig, ibid., pp. 200-1.

Abingdon, and to assess the extent of administrative disruption and discontinuity by making a detailed examination of the events of the period.

The dissolution of Abingdon abbey

The first landmark event of the period was the surrender of the abbey to the crown in February 1538, when the abbey's interests in Abingdon came under the control of the Court of Augmentations that had been founded in 1536 to administer monastic property and revenues.[3] The dissolution was the culmination of some years of harassment from Cromwell's administration towards the monastery, although there was 'nothing new' about limited royal interventions to divert the endowments of religious houses, and there were rumours from the late 1520s of a planned large scale attack.[4] Cromwell asked for the next presentation to the nearby parish of Sunningwell in 1533, and for the nomination of an internal appointment in the monastery in 1534. The abbot refused both requests, and continued to resist moves against his authority.[5] The abbot dismissed the steward, John Audlett, and pursued him for repayment of money that he claimed had been embezzled, despite Cromwell's patronage of Audlett.[6] The general visitation of monasteries in 1535 is accepted to be the formal starting point of the wholesale dissolution of religious houses. In 1535 Cromwell appointed commissioners to conduct visitations of monastic houses; these were not canonical visitations and were ostensibly intended to enforce acceptance of the alteration to the royal accession.[7] The commissioners also introduced reforms to

---

[3] W.C. Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations* (Baton Rouge, 1961), pp. 288-93 gives a narrative of the events in Abingdon, but his interpretation is gloomy and needs to be viewed with caution, see discussion in chapter 5 below.
[4] Cunich, 'The dissolutions and their aftermath', p. 224.
[5] *VCH, Berks,* II, 51-62. TNA SP 1/76 f.109 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4301480557); TNA SP 1/84 f.184 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4301580864).
[6] See p. 107.
[7] Each community had already been required to sign the oath of supremacy in 1534. Cunich, 'The dissolutions and their aftermath', pp. 224-5.

enforce a return to traditional monastic observance; when Dr. Layton visited Abingdon in early September 1535 he prohibited the monks from leaving the abbey precinct. Confinement was an unpleasant threat to the customary life of monastic establishments, which for a house like Abingdon could include a wide interaction with the outside world.[8] The abbot emphasised only his administrative responsibilities when he wrote to 'humbly beseech' Cromwell for permission to 'at time convenient oversee our lands'. The ban prevented them from inspecting their estates and in particular 'of old custom' at Michaelmas, when they also held manorial courts.[9] An equally threatening aspect of the visitations was the gathering of information about each community with a focus on moral failings, and the encouragement of informers in order to compile a report of scandal in religious houses, the *Compendium Compertorum*, later used as propaganda to support arguments for suppression. The notoriously 'gossipy' Layton also attacked the abbot's reputation with accusations, subsequently often repeated, that he kept prostitutes and had fathered two children by his own sister.[10] The reliability of the 1535 visitation reports is questionable, and tales of luxury and abuses fed into anti-monastic propaganda. Some complaints must have been justified, and echo those recorded previously in bishops' visitations.[11]

From 1535 onwards the surviving correspondence from the abbot to Cromwell is written in a flattering and conciliatory tone. The abbot hoped for support against Audlett, and in a letter in July 1535 sent to Cromwell shortly before the arrival of

---

[8] Hunting, for example, was a popular pursuit at Ulverscroft Priory and Roche Abbey; C. Cross, 'The last years of Roche abbey', p. 231; G. Baskerville, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London, 1937), p. 43.
[9] TNA SP 1/97 f.26 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4301700461).
[10] Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations,* pp. 288 ff.
[11] Baskerville, *English Monks,* pp. 76ff.

royal commissioners to hear the case against Audlett he wrote 'I have heard to my no small comfort by my friend Master Mason both how gently you received my letters and also the kind and loving words showed him in my behalf whereof part was the answer of my said letters and part a friendly admonition of my slackness in my business'. He goes on to appeal to Cromwell's 'ardent desire for justice and speedy search for the truth'.[12] In October 1535 the abbot arrested a priest for carrying a book of magic and reported this to Cromwell, anxious to protect himself and to establish a stance against superstitious practices.[13] The case against Audlett was resolved in the abbey's favour but this was perhaps a hollow victory. Audlett was reinstated as steward with all his leases, finally agreeing to repay £2500 to the abbot in return.[14] In September 1536 the abbot was anxious to assure Cromwell that he would protect Audlett's commons on the farms he leased and also reduce his debt because Cromwell had asked that he show Audlett kindness.[15] Abbot Thomas had by now other matters to worry about than his dispute with Audlett, and was probably coming to understand the scope of the government's intentions to suppress houses and divert their endowments. The separate commission to collect financial data on religious houses, which resulted in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, also went round the country in 1535, and this served as a further alert.[16] Once the bill for the suppression of smaller monastic houses was passed in March 1536, resistance to religious change in Lincolnshire and the north had failed, and the first major monastery (Furness) surrendered, he probably

---

[12] TNA SP 1/93 f.180 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4301600989).
[13] TNA SP 1/97 f.103 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4301700557).
[14] TNA SP 1/91 f.97 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4301600416). This document is dated [18 March] 1535, but should probably be dated 1536.
[15] TNA SP 1/106 f.98 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4301900405). There is a full narrative of these events in Cox, *Medieval Abingdon,* pp. 126-8.
[16] See pp. 91 and 105 above.

anticipated the suppression of all the larger houses. In common with other houses the abbot probably 'sought the best terms [he] could by quailing cooperation'.[17]

Abingdon was one of the earlier important monasteries to surrender; the Deed of Surrender was signed by the abbot, the prior and 24 monks on 9 February 1538.[18] The decorous process of the dissolution of the monastery, as planned and negotiated between the abbot and Cromwell, was intended to set an example to other religious houses. A dissident monk was ejected to ensure a peaceful transition; he was said to have threatened two other monks of Abingdon who were scraping the Pope's name out of service books saying 'by the mass ye are accursed as many and set knife or pen to the book'. He ended up in the custody of Bishop Shaxton of Salisbury, who wrote to Cromwell on 14 February to ask what he should do with him.[19] The advantageous settlement made to the retiring abbot was made in line with the wealth of the abbey, and not, as Richardson and others have suggested, as a reward for cooperation.[20] He was given a pension of £200 per annum, and a gentleman's residence, the manor house of Cumnor Place, for his lifetime. This had previously been a country retreat for the monks of Abingdon abbey, and he lived there in retirement as Sir Thomas Pentecost alias Rowland of Cumnor until his death in 1540. The prior and sub-prior were granted pensions of £22 and £20 respectively, also in line with the abbey's wealth, and those given to the other monks were £8 or less. At the less important Roche abbey in Yorkshire there were much smaller payments for the abbot and prior, but similar ones for the monks.[21] There are however indications of favourable terms

---

[17] Haigh, *English Reformations,* pp. 131, 137ff.
[18] *LP,* XIII, Pt.1, 242.
[19] Ibid, 275.
[20] Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations,* p. 289.
[21] *LP,* XIII, Pt. I, 7-11, 13b. C. Cross, 'The last years of Roche abbey', pp. 232f. The average pension is calculated by Baskerville at £5 p.a., *English Monks,* pp. 246-54.

for the monks of Abingdon, because they evidently took away, or disposed of, all movables apart from plate and ornaments.

In comparison to the removal of the monks the decommissioning of the abbey precinct turned out to be a more obviously destructive process. The position and size of the former abbey had been grand enough for it to be initially considered for conversion into a royal residence. Henry VIII had stayed at the abbey several times, and had spent a month there in 1518 because of plague in London. There may also have been concerns about the future of the site for strategic reasons to do with its access to river and road routes to London. Sir Richard Rich, who visited Abingdon a week after the surrender in his role as administrator of the revenues of suppressed houses, wrote to Cromwell to urge rejection of this plan, because both the buildings and the setting were inadequate. He reported that 'great treasure' would have to be expended on the abbot's lodging to make it 'like for an habitation of the King's Majesty', and that 'the houses of office thereof be much in ruin and decay' with the exception of the abbey church, which he described as a 'great and godly thing well repaired'. He added that ground to the north-east of the site could not be emparked without 'hindrance of tillage near the town' nor on the south side without taking away 'the best meadow ... the meads whereby the town of Abingdon being well replenished with people should decay'.[22] It is not possible to judge the accuracy of his remarks about the buildings, but his intention was clearly to be discouraging about the expenditure any conversion might occur. His argument on the subject of emparkment is curious because the abbey was set in 78 acres, including meadow land

[22] TNA SP 1/129 f.83 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4302280339). This letter appears in full in G.H. Cook, (comp.) *Letters to Cromwell and others on the Suppression of the Monasteries,* (London, 1965), pp. 145-7. It has been suggested that the 'flurry of activity' surrounding Rich's personal visit was connected with the plan to convert the abbey into a royal residence. J.A. Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London, 1971), p. 67.

not then or thereafter available to townspeople, and there was plenty of arable and meadow land in other parts of the town. However, whatever Rich's motives were, the abbey grounds were not promoted as a site for a royal palace, and no alternatives appear to have been considered at this stage. Within a month any possibility of an immediate major development or conversion was effectively ended with the demolition of the abbey church: large quantities of good quality building materials, such as stone and lead, were shipped down the Thames by river barge from Culham wharf.[23] Rich had advised that a 'greater part may be defaced and yet sufficient left for his graces contentation', without making it clear what Cromwell's plans might have been. Events had moved very quickly, and it might have been thought expedient to neutralize any potential local opposition to the dissolution by removing the spiritual heart of the abbey and destroying its central symbol of power.

By the end of May the demolition works were complete and the town was left to the supervision of John Wellesbourne, a courtier and member of a local gentry family, who was installed by the Court of Augmentations as temporary keeper of the abbey site. The town of Abingdon, in common with the rest of the abbey's estates, was already prey to the acquisitiveness of 'a queue of potential purchasers', forming up in advance of the dissolution.[24] In Abingdon the need for local officials to act on behalf of the Court of Augmentations was an immediate attraction to local gentry seeking fees, influence and opportunities to acquire property. The involvement of local gentry families in town government in fact pre-dated the dissolution, because the abbey, in common with other ecclesiastical landlords, had offered employment to them as stewards or lawyers. This had been integral to the abbey's administrative practice, and

---

[23] TNA E101/458/1.
[24] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 60.

the last steward John Audlett, who died in possession of a collection of abbey farms and leases shortly before the dissolution, was a wealthy and influential man.[25] An Audlett kinsman, William Button, appears to have acted as steward in his place, but his involvement with Abingdon ended with the surrender.[26] At the time of the surrender John Wellesbourne accused 'crafty' Button of concealing documents, although Button had written to Sir Richard Rich to tell him that all the steward's accounts, court rolls and so on were at 'my aunt' Audlett's, and that he wanted to claim for his allowances. He was in the Tower of London from March until August 1538 presumably as a result of accusations against him, but appears to have been working for Cromwell by December 1538. The Audlett connection did not end with the death in 1539 of John Audlett's widow Katherine, because she left her Abingdon farms and leases to her cousin Thomas Reade. He lived at Barton, and had a later role in the town's affairs as a founder governor of Christ's Hospital in 1553.[27] Reade's inheritance included Barton, Sugworth, Sunningwell and Uffington, and he built Barton House *c.*1553, reportedly using stone from the abbey site. The Reades were connected to other Berkshire gentry families, including the Hydes, and Thomas Reade's daughters married into the Vachell, Beke and Martyn families, all important in the Reading area. Thomas Reade died in 1556, while his son Thomas was still at school.

It is significant that the Court of Augmentation's administration of Abingdon was to be based on the employment of members of local gentry families who already had a

---

[25] See above pp. 80-81.
[26] *LP*, XIII Pt. I, 285, 379, Pt. II, 1004.
[27] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Katherine Audlett, 14 January 1540); TNA PROB 11/38 (will of Thomas Reade, 23 June, 1556).

history of working for the abbey.[28] This continuity cannot have been coincidental: their local knowledge was helpful and their involvement may have smoothed the process of surrender. John Wellesbourne, who acted for the Court during the surrender and survey period, was described as the abbot's supporter in August 1535 in a letter to Cromwell in connection with the Audlett dispute: 'divers of his friends, Mr. Welbourne, of the [royal] Court, young Umpton and Ashfield, Mr. Norris's servant, will consider it great extremity in us to have the Abbot sworn'.[29] It is not easy to trace the shifts in north Berkshire gentry alliances, but this makes it clear that the abbot had local gentry support. Wellesbourne had entered the Privy Chamber in 1519.[30] His brother Oliver had already been the abbot's bailiff for some years, possibly as early as 1512 and he was given various local appointments in 1539, including re-appointment as bailiff of the manor of Abingdon. Oliver Wellesbourne was connected by his first marriage to the Braybroke family and by his second to the Yate family, and through the Yates to the Fettiplaces, the Hydes and the Eystons. John Wellesbourne's letters to Cromwell consistently requested grants of appointments and lands, and his position was formalized as keeper of Abingdon abbey and Culham manor in January 1539, and as 'steward of the lands late of Abingdon monastery' in 1540. The lawyer Thomas Denton whose family owned the manor of Appleton, near Cumnor, was appointed under-steward, and also acted as recorder.[31] Denton was an important local figure who has been described as a typical younger son looking for opportunities to better his standing. He had represented Wallingford as MP in 1536 and Oxford in 1539. Denton was connected to most of

---

[28] This was probably not untypical. In Reading where the abbot resisted surrender several men made a transition from abbey to royal service. Martin, 'The people of Reading and the reformation', p. 391.
[29] TNA SP 1/95 f.135 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4301700162).
[30] M. Riordan, 'Henry VIII, privy chamber of (*act.* 1509–1547)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/70825, accessed 10 Sept 2010].
[31] *LP,* XIV pt. 1, 1355:43, 1355:340; XV, 1028, 11b., 1032.

the gentry in north Berkshire through his marriage to the widow of Edmund Fettiplace of Besselsleigh.[32] Denton is not known to have had a working relationship with the abbey, and his appointment exemplifies the argument that, as a side effect of acquiring monastic revenues, the dissolution brought country gentry into royal service.[33] Denton was also a well-known London lawyer with humanist connections, asked by Cromwell to work with Sir Nicholas Bacon to advise on an abortive proposal to create a fifth Inn of Court.[34]

The Wellesbournes and Denton ran Abingdon until John Wellesbourne died in April 1548. Abingdon's chief or high stewards were national figures with no interest in the town other than maintaining their sphere of influence.[35] The dissolution of Abingdon abbey had left a political vacuum in north Berkshire, and there was no locally based aristocratic sphere of influence to fill it. The abbey's old power-base was dissolved with the dispersal of its estates into a mixed ownership of old Berkshire gentry families, London merchants and courtiers.[36] Many estates, clearly bought as investments, quickly changed hands; for some years a frenzy of acquisition and swapping (accompanied by jostling for status and influence) occupied local land-owners, both new and old. Quarrels among members of the local gentry were exacerbated by the pressure and opportunities of change. One local gentleman who was a particularly acquisitive and difficult neighbour was Christopher Aston (or Assheton) of Fyfield. He lived west of Abingdon at Fyfield, and was the fourth husband of Lady Katharine Gordon (Perkin Warbeck had been her first husband). He

---

[32] S.T. Bindoff (ed.) *The House of Commons, 1503-58* (History of Parliament, 3 vols., 1982), II, 30f.
[33] S.J. Gunn, *Early Tudor Government, 1485-1558* (London, 1995), pp. 26f.
[34] R. Tittler, 'Bacon, Sir Nicholas (1510–1579)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/1002, accessed 10 Sept 2010].
[35] Cromwell, Thomas Seymour and the Duke of Somerset are all known to have held the appointment.
[36] For the changing ownership of north-west Berkshire manors see *VCH, Berkshire,* IV, Ock and Sutton Hundreds.

had pressured the abbot of Abingdon in 1536 for leases, and he was accused (through his servants) of the serious wounding of a local gentleman, William Hyde, in 1539 (in connection with a dispute with William's cousin, Katherine Audlett). He was described by Lord Sandys to Cromwell as 'a man of marvellous perverse and evil conditions. Many honest persons both in town and country stand in great dread of him'. Later he was the subject of a commission of enquiry into alleged unlawful exactions at the musters in 1543, and eventually he was bankrupted and disgraced because of his involvement with the Dudley conspiracy in 1556.[37] However, the town of Abingdon, no longer the centre of a great land-owning estate, offered limited opportunities to outside parties while the Wellesbournes and Denton were in office there. Their local experience and their connections to most of the established north Berkshire gentry families helped them manage the town without any apparent local interference.

The removal of the abbey and the change of government did not therefore offer an immediate chance for the townsmen themselves to acquire new responsibilities or powers. Wellesbourne evidently ran the town with efficiency, although it was nearly a year before his office as steward was confirmed. His personal ambition coincided with a clear idea of what needed to be achieved in Abingdon, as can be seen from his request for authority to preside at law-days and courts and his description of his suggested appointee as under-steward: 'an honest gentleman, well learned in the law and the Latin tongue, a man of judgement and substance'. In September 1538 he wrote asking for 'commission or patent' to carry out the King's desire for him 'to be at all law-days and courts'. He recommended his choice of John Pollard, later

[37] See p. 79. Sandys' letter in support of William Hyde must have been written in 1539 and has been wrongly dated as the same day (9 February 1538) as the surrender of Abingdon abbey. *LP,* XII, pt. 1, 167; XIV, pt. 1, 223; XVIII, pt. 1, 558; XIII, pt. 1, 245.

purchaser of the manor of Nuneham Courtenay and Speaker of the House of Commons in 1553, as under-steward. In the event Thomas Denton, who was equally well qualified was appointed.[38] Wellesbourne was evidently given permission to hold courts and law-days, because he promised to report on them to Cromwell in October 1538.[39] The evidence shows that the town's administration by the Court of Augmentations was efficient and effective. The town was managed much as it had been under the abbey, showing what seems likely to have been a distinct degree of continuity in policy and practice. The six almsmen attached to the Hospital of St. John's by the abbey gateway continued to receive an allowance of £15 12s p.a.[40] At the court leet, presumably according to custom, three 'decenners' (tithing men) were appointed for different parts of the town (the Bury, the west part and 'Upwath'), along with two constables, two testers of beer, two examiners of hides, two keepers of the Stert and four keepers of the New Bridge.[41] We have seen that leading townsmen played their part: Richard Large, constable in 1545 when he witnessed the will of a wealthy local widow, was a well-to-do chandler and later continued his civic career as a burgess, dying in office in 1558.[42] Other future civic office-holders James Fisher and Humphrey Bostock acted as custodians of the bridge in 1546, while Oliver Hyde and Richard Smythe were constables in 1548.[43] Whilst men like Large might have wished for more than to retain a foothold in town government, the representatives of the Court of Augmentations and the businessmen of Abingdon shared the same short-

---

[38] Deputy- or under-steward was used as an alternative title for a legal adviser at both Newbury and Windsor. Baker, *Historic Abingdon,* p. 6

[39] *LP* XIII, Pt. 2, 378, 699; *VCH, Oxon,* V, 234-49.

[40] Bodleian Library, Ms. Berks Roll 10, Edward VI.

[41] *VCH, Berks,* IV, 430-51.

[42] The Fraternity deeds in Christ's Hospital, Calendar of Documents Vol. 2, 1399-1538 give the names of a number of Constables acting as witness. Large is named in Joan Tonks' will, TNA PROB/11/30 (1 July 1545).

[43] BRO D/EP/7/74.

term aim: they required a stable administration independent from interference to sustain the community's economic and social well-being.

Wellesbourne needed to prove himself as a local government representative and to demonstrate to Cromwell that he was able to establish order and authority. There are no signs that the change of administration in 1538 was generally unwelcome to the people of Abingdon. Early reports of reaction to the dissolution of the abbey were all favourable, according to John Wellesbourne's reports to Cromwell. Cromwell received his assurances that all was well in the town, and that, partly due to his expenditure on housekeeping 'the town and country say they were never better contented than now'.[44] As Cromwell's man Wellesbourne became part of an informal national network which policed opposition to government policies. The potential of rumour-mongering to escalate into criticism and then to protest was taken very seriously, particularly after the northern uprisings of 1536-7. Although Berkshire was never a hotspot of rebellion, the government had traced a rumour of the king's death to Reading in late 1537 and taken it very seriously. In December 1537 a Reading man had been sentenced to a severe punishment (he was pilloried, his ears were cut off, and he was whipped naked) by three of the king's commissioners in Berkshire for a 'seditious tale'. Both the abbot of Reading and the Norris family had come under suspicion. The interpretation of gossip and rumour as criticism and sedition typifies the government's ongoing fear of and response to dissent. Wellesbourne's attitude reflects the concerns of central government to stamp on any hint of dissent or trouble-making, particularly in connection to reformation changes.[45]

---

[44] TNA SP 1/130 f.94 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4302280564).

[45] *LP,* XII, part 2, 1298; G.R. Elton, *Policy and Police: the enforcement of the Reformation in the age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 73, 5ff, 383 describes the 'energetic and continuous'

In March 1538, just after the demolition of the abbey had started, he reported to Cromwell that he had sent an Abingdon man to the gaol at Oxford castle because the under-sheriff had brought a proclamation from 'your lordship' ordering the punishment of 'all persons as brought up new rumours'. Robert ap Howell had been 'noising in Oxford that certain men were killed here [in Abingdon] by falling of a wall in the church ... whereupon certain wives of Oxford came hither with noise enough to look after their husbands' and were glad to find them alive. Ap Howell had then been whipped out of Oxford, and Wellesbourne asked for Cromwell's advice about what to do with him on his return to Abingdon.[46] Although this incident appears relatively trivial it combined the undesirable elements of an alarmed group of people with potential grievances or superstitious fears about the demolition process. The unfortunate ap Howell was probably just a gossip, but Wellesbourne was in no position to risk any sort of group demonstration. Careless talk was reported again to Cromwell in connection with Abingdon in September 1538: a traveller passed on gossip while en route from London to Abergavenny that he had heard at the Lamb in Abingdon, claiming that entries in the newly-introduced parish registers would be taxed.[47] In October 1538 Wellesbourne sent John Davy, the curate of nearby Radley 'who has spoken many traitorous words against the King' directly to Cromwell. His letter emphasised that 'many honest men of Abingdon' could bear witness against Davy, and that 'many of the poor' went in fear of him.[48] Wellesbourne trod a fine line

---

activity of 'discovering and communicating suspects'; see also A. Wall, *Power and Protest in England 1525-1640* (London, 2000), pp. 130-33.

[46] TNA SP 1/130 f.94 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4302280564). Elton misdates this letter to 1537, but the context clearly shows that it was written after the dissolution of Abingdon abbey. Elton, *Policy and Police,* p. 47.

[47] *LP,* XIII, pt. 2, 413; Elton, *Policy and Police,* p. 68. We do not know whether Wellesbourne was called to account about this.

[48] TNA SP 1/138 f.26 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC 4302380714).

between handing in a trouble-maker and raising concerns about whether he had allowed Davy to gain public support.

Other indications of Wellesbourne's energetic approach to the management of Abingdon are that he spent £9 13s 4d on repairs to the cage with a pair of stocks to 'chastise and punish vagabonds malefactors and disturbers of the King's peace' as a response to potential trouble. He also spent 41s 2d on the 'portmot' (also called the court house) and three shops and a dungeon underneath it.[49] He evidently established effective authority; at no stage are there any reports of the theft or spoliation at the abbey site experienced at Hailes and elsewhere. It was a sign of his reliability that he was able, as a commissioner for the muster, to send one hundred foot to Flanders in 1543, and there are no further hints of any administrative jitters about local protest during his time of office.[50]

The survival of letters gives an eyewitness insight into some aspects of the town that is almost unique for sixteenth century Abingdon. The reports need to be viewed with caution, especially because the anxiety that underlies Wellesbourne's letters raises questions about their veracity. There is no evidence, however, that points to anything other than a peaceful transfer of power from the abbey to the crown. The Wellesbournes and Denton offered administrative continuity, and it seems likely that they and the leading townsmen were in accord about how the town should be run. In terms of administrative practice not much had changed for the community.

---

[49] BRO D/EP7/37, transcription of Ministers Accounts No. 109 (1538).
[50] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation,* pp. 162ff.; *LP,* XVIII, pt. 1, 832.

The dissolution of the chantries and the incorporations of the 1550s

The removal of the fraternity in the second wave of dissolutions in 1547 was a second landmark event that was as momentous and more disruptive for Abingdon than the dissolution of the abbey.[51] The fraternity had continued to play its own important role in the life of the town, and it could be argued that it was only when it was disbanded that the government of Abingdon changed in a significant way for its people. As in other towns without borough corporations, the fraternity, a continuous legal entity, had taken on a significant role because it was able to own and administer property, and was trusted to do so for the benefit of the wider community. The 1548 Chantry Certificate details expenditure of over £40 split between almspeople (£23 3s 8d) and highways and bridges (£18 6s 11d).[52] This level of expenditure underlines the fraternity's significant role in the public life of Abingdon, in contrast to some guilds in larger towns and cities. The most important guild in Worcester, the Holy Trinity Guild, maintained a school, walls and a bridge on an annual income below £13.[53] By 1548 the Abingdon fraternity rent roll was worth £81 13s 10d, including 73 properties in the town, although properties outside the town produced just over half the rental income.[54] With the dissolution of the fraternity, along with the older chantry of Our Lady at St. Helen's church, the town's leadership lost not only its source of civic pride and prestige and its formal means of expression, but also its independent administrative role. In many communities this second phase of dissolutions was a 'pretext for financial manoeuvres and power plays', although in Abingdon there is no

---

[51] Cunich, 'The dissolution of the Chantries', pp. 159ff, especially pp. 168-9.
[52] BRO D/EP/33 includes a transcription of Abingdon's Chantry Certificates.
[53] A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester,* p. 229.
[54] A full rent roll survives for Michaelmas 1548 (BRO D/EP/33) and most of the Abingdon properties can be identified in the Amyce Survey. The most significant income from outside the town came from land holdings nearby at Caldecott, Sutton and Culham (yielding over £30 altogether): the rental for the Farm of Caldecott, granted to the Fraternity in 1434 by Sir John Golafre, was £14 13s 4d in 1547-8, and included the St. Helen's mills.

evidence of efforts to conceal property or income.[55] In 1548 local representatives of the Court of Augmentations became totally responsible for every aspect of local government.

A later chapter will discuss the religious and cultural impact of the dissolution years on the community of Abingdon. In the context of administrative concerns it has been generally assumed that the dissolution of the fraternity was the impetus for the leading townsmen to lobby for self-government. It may be that their resolve had its roots in an ancient antagonism between abbey and town, and that the townsmen viewed themselves as taking on the mantle of their forebears. It is clear that after 1548 they actively sought to regain some sort of incorporated and formalised status. Abingdon's experience of reformation change was in marked contrast to that of some other unincorporated towns. Before the dissolution Burton-on-Trent had been in a similar situation to Abingdon: the Benedictine abbey was the only substantial land-owner, and leading townsmen had acted collectively but without any formal powers. By 1545 Sir William Paget had acquired the lordship, and went on to convert the abbey buildings into a residence, the abbey church into a parish church and to revive the town's textile trade.[56] There is no evidence of local opposition to the transition of lordship in Burton-on-Trent, but in other communities townsmen used a variety of strategies to establish a greater degree of autonomy for themselves. The acquisition and defence of resources old and new led in some cases to an extended conflict between new landlords and their townsmen tenants. Beccles, Aylesbury and Barnstaple are examples of towns where conflicts arose between purchasers of

---

[55] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation,* p. 237; Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 68f.
[56] The municipal borough was not established until 1878. *VCH, Stafford,* IX, 5-20.

lordships and jurisdictions.[57] In Abingdon the townsmen did not find themselves at odds with powerful secular landlords, but they did seek a release from the administrative limbo in which they found themselves.

Abingdon has been called 'a problem child of the crown' on the assumption that the retention of the administration of the town by the Court of Augmentations was an unattractive economic burden. Tittler also viewed Abingdon as a 'distressed community', unable to maintain essential public works or meet fiscal obligations to the Crown, but there is no evidence that it was. The annual accounts show that the town yielded a reasonable annual income, and in addition money was coming in from the sale of properties.[58] But it is certainly true that running the town was an administrative burden that was added to by the dissolution of the fraternity. Although the crown could not resource it in the long term the continued retention of the lordship of Abingdon by the Court of Augmentations may have been a political decision. The Court was evidently unwilling to sell, give away or lease out the lordship of the town, perhaps because Abingdon, with its position on important road and river routes not so far from London, may have had too much potential as a power-base to be granted away. Furthermore, successive governments in the 1540s and 1550s recognised the need for strategic strength and support for towns, in order to make them effective local centres of authority and regulation. The idea that groups of trustworthy local men might be empowered to address urban problems to the benefit of the crown and communities alike gained momentum, both in the context of charitable institutions and of municipal government. The selection of specific individuals who would

---

[57] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 76-7, 80-9.
[58] Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations,* p. 288; Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns.* p. 91.

replace themselves by co-option shut the door on popular elections.[59] Patterson has pointed out that the crown's compliance to requests for incorporation strengthened royal control over boroughs.[60] Incorporation became an increasingly likely course of action for Abingdon once the Court of Augmentations was absorbed back into the Exchequer in 1554.

A further factor in the late 1540s that contributed to the impetus for administrative change in Abingdon was the intervention of Sir John Mason. Mason had been a protégé of the last abbot, perhaps his nephew, possibly his son. He had been educated at Abingdon, then Oxford University, and subsequently, with the help of Sir Thomas More, in Paris. According to notes made at Christ's Hospital later in the sixteenth century, he was of a 'simple and mean parentage' but brought up in 'good erudition' at the monastery.[61] The abbot referred to him as his friend in 1535.[62] His diplomatic career kept his attention away from Abingdon, but the accession of Edward VI offered him new opportunities to work in England and improve his status and income. Mason has been described as 'cold, competent and imaginative ... one of the ablest of the group of humanistic officers of state that emerged in the late Henrician years'. By now in his forties, he continued to be active in pursuit of sources of income, a factor in his interest in Abingdon. His subsequent career shows that he was a remarkable survivor, and belied his claim that his motto was 'do and say nothing'. He kept his place on the privy council under Mary, was at various times an MP and Chancellor of

---

[59] Tittler, 'The emergence of urban policy 1536-58', pp. 74ff., and P. Slack, 'Social policy and the constraints of government 1547-58', in R. Tittler and J. Loach (eds.), *Mid-Tudor Polity c.1540-1560* (New Jersey, 1980), pp. 94ff.
[60] Patterson, *Urban Patronage in Early Modern England,* pp. 155ff.
[61] Cox, *Peace and War,* p. 50.
[62] TNA SP 1/93 f.180 (*SPO,* Gale Doc. No. MC4301600989).

the University of Oxford, became ambassador to Charles V, and was the only senior household officer to retain his post (treasurer of the chamber) under Elizabeth. [63]

There are a number of possible explanations for Mason's reintroduction into the affairs of Abingdon, which for many years can have been only of minor concern to him. He might have been approached by men in the town, perhaps old friends and schoolfellows, in search of a 'friend at court' after the dissolution of the fraternity and the death of Sir John Wellesbourne in 1548 and the attainder and execution of Thomas Seymour, Lord Sudeley, high steward of Abingdon, in early 1549. It is most likely that Mason gained his appointments in Abingdon because of his position as a reliable and trusted man.[64] As Paget's protégé Mason was in a position to gain influence, and was a privy councillor by April 1550. The privy council may have wanted close control of Abingdon in the light of the 1549 rebellions, which involved the neighbouring county of Oxfordshire. Problems were also expected in Berkshire, but although the Duke of Somerset came to the county to investigate 'commotions and uproars' there is no evidence of unrest any further south than Thame in Oxfordshire.[65] It is not clear whether Somerset was acting as high steward or as keeper of the abbey site when members of his household arranged the removal of a bargeful of stone from the inner court to use for the building of Somerset House in 1549.[66] Mason was granted the site of the abbey on 4 January 1550, and presumably secured the keepership and high stewardship of the lands of Abingdon abbey as a

---

[63] *The chronicle and political papers of King Edward VI,* ed. W.K. Jordan (London, 1966), p. 21; P.R.N. Carter, 'Mason, Sir John (*c.*1503–1566)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/18278, accessed 10 Sept 2010]; Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 295-6; Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 42-4.

[64] A. Bryson, 'Edward VI's 'speciall men': crown and locality in Mid Tudor England', *Historical Research,* 82:216 (2009), 229-53.

[65] K. Halliday, 'New light on 'the commotion time' of 1549: the Oxfordshire rising', *Historical Research,* 82 (2009), 655.

[66] Longleat House Archive, TH/Vol. II, 1542-57, correspondence of Sir John Thynne senior, 7.

result of Somerset's fall at the end of 1551.[67] It is not known why he relinquished the site, which was acquired in December 1551 by Thomas Wroth, a courtier who was closely tied to Edward VI's protestant regime, who then sold it on to William Blacknall, a yeoman Berkshire miller in 1553.[68]

Mason's reputation in Abingdon to the present day is that of a founder of the modern town, and his increasingly powerful role between 1548 and 1566 has been viewed as benign. Opinions about him have been polarised, and have either exaggerated his interest in Abingdon or denigrated it. For example, it is claimed that 'throughout his career Mason worked to protect and promote the interests of his native Abingdon'. But there is no evidence of any such activity before the late 1540s, when he was at least 45 years old. Preston took a cynical view of Mason, pointing out that his will made no mention of Abingdon, that his policy was generally to turn events 'to his own profit', and that he had done nothing to 'justify the indiscriminate laudation bestowed on him' by Little, when he wrote about him in the 1620s. In general his official interests in the security and well-being of Abingdon as a privy councillor have been ignored, and his personal interests over-emphasised. Mason should be acknowledged as a prime mover in the town's successful administrative reconstruction, but he acted as a representative of central government rather than as a son of the town.[69]

The sequence of events that achieved governmental reconstruction in Abingdon is obscure, but Mason's influence was no doubt crucial. As a privy councillor he may

---

[67] TNA, Amyce Survey, ff.211-2.
[68] S. Lehmberg, 'Wroth, Sir Thomas (1518?–1573)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/30084, accessed 10 Sept 2010]; Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 42-3.
[69] Carter, 'Mason, Sir John'; Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 46.

have been 'guided by social theorists of the age', and would certainly have been well aware of their ideas.[70] He might well have favoured policies to bolster regulatory power and legal status for town authorities.[71] Ian Archer has pointed out that 'in view of the weakness of its own resources the power of the centre could only advance by means of compromises with local groups'.[72] It was in his official capacity that Mason was in touch with leading men in Abingdon concerning some sort of problem, 'a treason or commotion', which arose in the Abingdon area in 1551, resulting in a special commission of oyer and terminer in the November of that year. Mason was reimbursed for money paid to certain men of Abingdon for their evidence.[73] No details are known about the treason, but it may have helped make the case for the town's leadership to regain some of their former authority and responsibilities under his supervision.

Although in Abingdon this was unusually achieved in two steps, the town's acquisition of formal self-governing powers was in the context of a national trend. A large number of boroughs were incorporated in the sixteenth century, mostly to confirm or to transfer lordship in the wake of the dissolution era. Abingdon was one of twenty-four towns incorporated during the reign of Mary; about half had never had a charter, and the rest only 'non-incorporative' charters of doubtful validity. However, many other towns remained under lordship (like Burton-on-Trent) or developed governing mechanisms through trusts that were similar to Abingdon's fraternity. Bury St. Edmunds, another ex-monastic town, failed to achieve incorporation at this period,

---

[70] Slack, 'Social Policy and the constraints of government, 1547-58', pp. 94ff.
[71] Tittler, 'The emergence of uban policy 1536-58', pp. 78-80, 88-89. I am indebted to Dr. Manfred Brod for a helpful conversation on this subject.
[72] Archer, 'Politics and Government, 1540-1700', p. 235.
[73] *Acts of the Privy Council of England, 1542-1631,* ed. J.R. Dasent (46 vols., 1890-1964), III, 421,423. Thomas Denton and Oliver Wellesbourne were among the seven commissioners.

and townsmen failed to acquire as much ex-abbey property as they would have liked due to the 'financial strength of the regional gentry'.[74] It has been suggested that Mason's continued role in town affairs was 'the price the burgesses paid' for his support.[75] But it is questionable whether the townsmen of Abingdon would have achieved the level of independent government that they did in the 1550s without the support of Mason or another 'friend at court'.

Mason promoted a plan to re-establish the dissolved fraternity as a lay institution, with himself as Master for life, maintaining the almshouse and bridges using income yielded by re-granted property. Mason was an active member of the Privy Council when, in March 1552, the council wrote to the Court of Augmentations ordering the 'restitution to the townsmen of Abingdon of such lands ... as were lately taken from them ... within the compass of the Act of Chantries'.[76] Such an institution had the potential to be as attractive to central government as the wealthier guilds had once been, as a repository of the traditional values of a rich and successful leading class. The establishment of Christ's Hospital in 1553 put in place a private, elitist and wholly oligarchic organisation that could build on the prestige of the former fraternity and might establish itself as the pre-eminent force in the government of Abingdon. The eleven governors, appointed for life, included four former masters of the fraternity. All were important Abingdon men, apart from Mason's associate, Roger Amyce, a surveyor for the Court of Augmentations. Amyce was an Essex man who had developed interests in Berkshire. Amyce was named with Mason as grantee in the Hospital Charter, and later claimed that the Hospital had been established by 'his means'. He may have had a greater role in the hospital than has previously been

[74] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 153ff, 164, 83ff, 61-2.
[75] Cox, *Peace and War,* p. 15.
[76] *Acts of the Privy Council,* ed. Dasent, IV, 226,227.

thought, and succeeded Mason as Master in 1566.[77] Mason's consent was requisite for the election of a new governor; after his death the governors would be able to elect new masters by a majority vote, and to choose replacement governors. Christ's Hospital was given wider powers to support the poor and needy and to help maintain a grammar school, and also to purchase land and receive bequests.[78] Christ's Hospital could only be granted 'possessions remaining unsold of the late fraternity', and lost almost everything that the fraternity had owned outside Abingdon. The grant of fifteen ex-abbey properties partly made up for this, but the rent-roll total was reduced to £65 6s 5d in 1553 from £81 13s 10d in 1548.[79]

In 1551 Mason had requested that his position in the town be safeguarded when he objected to a proposal from 'the town of Abingdon' for a corporation (which included the grant of the abbey site), asserting 'there is no one thing that more continueth a daily hurt to the realm than corporations'.[80] The grant of Christ's Hospital into his direct control was presumably a favour to Mason from the Privy Council. After this he was prepared to change his mind, and is thought to have helped secure Abingdon's borough Charter of Incorporation, granted in November 1556. In 1625 the borough minutes referred to him as the 'procurer of the corporation'.[81] The charter is based on Amyce's survey of the town, made in October 1554, so it is possible that arrangements for incorporation were put in hand soon after the foundation of Christ's

---

[77] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 27; P.W. Hasler, The House of Commons 1558-1603, (History of Parliament, 3 Vols., 1981-2), I, 319; Amyce's memoranda on a copy of the 1554 survey stated that he supported the Borough Charter petition, BRO D/EP7 (AEP A(2)).

[78] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 26ff., CHA, Minutes, ff.1-12.

[79] The grant of ex-abbey property included two valuable acquisitions, the Antelope Inn (previously the abbey's *novum hospitium*, or New Inn), and the farm of Lacy's Court, as well as fishing rights on part of the Thames. BRO, D/EP/33, transcription of the Fraternity Rent Roll 1547-8; CHA, Office Copy Survey made by Roger Amyce, 1553, f.3.

[80] P.F. Tytler, *England under the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, illustrated in a series of original letters never before printed with historical introductions and biographical and critical notes* (2 vols., London, 1839), I, 361-2.

[81] Challenor, p. 139.

Hospital. Palliser considers that Mason's original objection was based on his acquisition of the abbey site: if so he may have changed his mind after the site's disposal to Wroth and then to Blacknall.[82] Although the town's incorporation might now be viewed as a political inevitability, the resurrection of the fraternity in a new secular guise certainly had not been. Had the grant of a town charter gone ahead in 1551 the former possessions and responsibilities of the fraternity would probably have been subsumed into the municipality. This happened to important institutions after their dissolution in King's Lynn, Colchester and Winchester, while in Maidstone the mayor and burgesses purchased the urban properties of the Corpus Christi fraternity at incorporation in 1548.[83] Abingdon's charter created a borough comprised of the built-up town, two farms (Fitzharris and Lacy's Court, originally one manor) and the abbey site. The new corporation was granted all the ex-monastic properties not previously disposed of; it had missed the opportunity of owning either the properties recently granted to Christ's Hospital or any portion of the main abbey site.

The town's elite had lent money to secure Christ's Hospital's charter. The hospital's expenses totalled over £27: the fees of the privy signet, privy seal and great seal came to over £16, and the rest was paid to the Lord Chancellor and other officials. It cost a further £6 in expenses for governors' visits in 1553 and 1554 to London on hospital business: in one case 'tarrying waiting upon Sir John Mason ... for the book of statute ... and for writing of the same'. By 1557, £19 had been repaid to five different current and future governors.[84] The same level of local investment was probably required to sponsor the town's charter. Tittler found that the presence of a forward looking and

---

[82] See pp. 123-4. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth,* p. 267
[83] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 113, 118; M. Zell, 'Landholding and the land market in early modern Kent' in M. Zell (ed.), *Early Modern Kent 1540-1640* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 39-74.
[84] CHA, Accounts 1553-1606, f.13ff.

independently minded elite played a crucial part in the acquisition of a grant of incorporation, regardless of whether or not 'effective institutions of self-government' had previously been in place. Abingdon's leading men were indeed sufficiently prosperous and independent to form a 'driving force', to 'seize the moment' to seek political change in order to gain or regain 'lands or resources which would provide a sound base for civic finance, or a restoration of important educational or social institutions'.[85]

Preston states that Mason's deputy steward, since he himself was rarely in Abingdon, was Christopher Arundell. Arundell's will written in 1557 confirms that he had a house and high quality possessions in Abingdon and that he was indebted to Sir John Mason (one of his executors) for his kindness when he 'was like to be driven out of the country'. Arundell was a lawyer, with property both locally and scattered around southern England, a wife, and a chamber at All Souls' College, Oxford, where he had some sort of administrative role. There is no more evidence (other than a collection of small bequests to various townspeople) of what he was doing in Abingdon, but he was almost certainly acting as Mason's private local representative. Mason retained the high stewardship and the keepership of the abbey site, with fees of £20 p.a. for the post as high steward, and £6 1s 8d for the keepership until his death in 1566. Sir Thomas Denton carried on as deputy steward of Abingdon, and according to one source replaced John Wellesbourne as steward after his death in 1548.[86] Denton's main focus, however, moved away from north Berkshire in the early 1550s. It seems likely that this was a career move rather than a reaction to Mason's new controlling interest in Abingdon. In 1554 he promoted the borough incorporation of Banbury in

[85] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 136ff.
[86] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 42; TNA PROB 11/46 (Will of Christopher Arundell, 29 March 1563); Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 296; Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations,* p. 292.

north Oxfordshire and stood as the town's new MP. By the time of his death in 1558 he had moved to an estate at Hillesden in Buckinghamshire which he had purchased in 1547 and was MP for the county.[87]

There is no evidence that Sir John Mason's influence over town government brought him into conflict with the town's leadership, and it seems probable that they found the structures he instigated were very acceptable. He had created an administrative and political power-base, with the support of central government, probably partly to ensure the town's continued independence from less welcome spheres of influence. The corporation's relationship with Sir John Mason continued to develop on a mutually beneficial patron-client basis, focussed on the parliamentary franchise which had been granted at incorporation; this set the tone for future interaction with successive high stewards.[88] Although neither Sir John Mason nor a high steward is mentioned in the charter, it is generally accepted that he assumed the role and nominated Abingdon's MPs. Oliver Hyde, Mason's deputy at Christ's Hospital, Abingdon's first MP, was officially elected by the mayor, burgesses and community, so there was probably a participatory element in the choice.[89] His influence over the day to day running of the borough is not known, but he retained a very close involvement with Christ's Hospital, and the statutes made in 1558 tightened his control of the governors.[90]

The double structure of hospital and borough reinforced the oligarchic nature of town government. Christ's Hospital remained private and prestigious, and, although most

---

[87] BRO D/EP/94; *VCH, Oxon.*, X, 71-89.
[88] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 171-3.
[89] Bindoff (ed.), *The House of Commons 1509-58,* I, 32.
[90] These laid down that he had the nomination of his deputy, of almspeople, auditor and visitor as well as a veto of new governors. CHA, Minutes, ff.8-12.

governors were also burgesses, from the start their number included gentlemen who held themselves aloof from the town corporation.[91] The mayor, bailiffs and burgesses were a larger and so less elitist group of twelve principal burgesses and sixteen (enlarged before 1599 to twenty) secondary burgesses. A small element of democracy was built in by a provision in the charter which allowed 'the secondary burgesses and other the burgesses and men of the inferior sort in the said borough, inhabitants', to nominate two of the principal burgesses for the office of mayor, from which the principal burgesses could make their annual choice. They were also allowed to select one of the two bailiffs from the group of principal or secondary burgesses.[92] Mason may well have taken the view that if necessary he would be able to influence the corporation's policies and activities through those governors of Christ's Hospital who took on a dual role on the town council.[93] In practice this meant that Abingdon's leading townsmen were able to organise the internal affairs of the town as they wanted, free of external interference so long as they provided discipline and stability, and paid the fee farm.

Conclusion

The removals of the abbey and later the fraternity were both remarkably disruptive events for Abingdon's administration, but even in the short term the post-dissolution government demonstrates a degree of continuity rather than a 'void'. The Court of Augmentations used locally known and locally experienced appointees who ran the town much as it had been before. The emergence of the borough of Abingdon,

---

[91] This was the case for two of the founding Governors, both members of the local gentry. Thomas Reade was Katherine Audlett's heir and one of four surviving masters of the fraternity; Oliver Hyde was later Abingdon's first MP.
[92] Challenor, pp. 12-14.
[93] The first mayor was Richard Mayott, one of the governors who had been a master of the fraternity. Altogether five of the first twelve principal burgesses were already governors of Christ's Hospital.

eighteen years after the dissolution of the abbey, can be viewed as the end result of the policies of successive national governments to ensure that the town remained stable. Wellesbourne, Denton, Mason, Wroth and Amyce were all at different times seen as a 'safe pair of hands'. It might be viewed as an affirmation of the community's ability to 'cope' that it was eventually trusted to run its own affairs in a relatively independent manner. It was the leading businessmen, many of whom became the governors of Christ's Hospital and the burgesses of the borough, who stood to gain 'beneficial results' from administrative reconstruction in association with each other as a ruling class. We shall see in following chapters that they had worked together proactively during the immediate post-dissolution period, not only to lobby to establish their role in new governing structures, but also to promote Abingdon's economic life and their own economic and social standing within the town.

Chapter 5

Abingdon's post-dissolution economy 1538-56

The previous chapter has described how, by the early 1550s, the townspeople of Abingdon had experienced a period of governmental upheaval and dislocation, followed by an administrative reconstruction that would eventually improve their political position. We now need to ask questions about how this period affected other aspects of life in the town, and to establish in particular the impact of the dissolution on the town's previously stable and successful economy.

Early modern towns have generally been viewed as vulnerable societies, prone to suffer from long- or short-term difficulties and crises due to social and economic changes. For the last forty years, as has already been discussed, there has continued to be disagreement about the chronology and extent of the crisis or crises. The mid-Tudor period has been seen as one that manifested a 'perplexing variety' of problems, including price rises, demographic problems and epidemics.[1] The view that the early modern town was inherently unstable has provided the context for negative historical judgements about the role of the reformation in urban communities. The reformation period has been seen as a watershed, a time of change, a 'vast sorting out': 'if only one factor can be indicated as the turning point between medieval and early modern in the Tudor town, then this was it'.[2] Many historians have seen the reformation as a stress-factor in the already stressful life of the typical town.[3]

---

[1] Slack, 'Social Policy and the constraints of government', pp. 94-115.
[2] Tittler, 'Reformation, resources and authority', p. 191; A. Dyer, 'The Urban Economy', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn. 2009), p. 34.
[3] Clark (ed.), *Country Towns in pre-industrial England,* p. 14.

The effects of the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s and the later dissolution of the chantries are considered to be particularly deleterious, provoking a crisis for some towns. The entire dissolution period has been interpreted as a period of 'upheaval' of both secular and religious belief and practice that impacted communities on different levels and in different ways.[4] Palliser viewed the wholesale loss of monasteries, chantries, religious guilds and hospitals, and shrines in the 1530s and 1540s as 'catastrophic for most cathedral cities and for those with many religious houses'.[5] Emphasis has been put upon the local economic role of major monasteries, in particular, as customers and employers, as generators of income from visitors and pilgrims, and as providers of relief to the poor. Clark and Slack wrote about the 'dramatic, sometimes devastating effect' of the reformation, and claimed that the dissolution of religious houses 'seriously undermined the economy of numerous middling towns'. They gave Abingdon as an example: 'Abingdon, for instance, complained bitterly after the dissolution of its abbey that "the town is sore decayed and like daily more to decay"'.[6] It has been suggested that after the closure of the monasteries there was no formal leadership to respond to a general reduction of provision for the poor. The importance of the contribution made by religious houses has been underlined by the calculation that 7-8% of monastic income was expended on poor relief.[7]

It is generally agreed that the situation deteriorated when the guilds were suppressed in 1548. A.G. Dickens and more recently Cunich have argued that the importance of the second phase of dissolution, that of the chantries in 1548, has been under-

---

[4] Cunich, 'The dissolutions', p. 236.
[5] Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth*, pp. 269-70.
[6] Clark and Slack, *English towns in Transition*, pp. 146, 32.
[7] N.Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision in Tudor England: quantifying and qualifying poor relief in the early sixteenth century', *Continuity and Change*, 16 (2001) 9-44.

estimated. The inhabitants of unincorporated towns lost the cohesive institutions on which they relied to support their social and religious interests and promoted their quasi-political ambitions. The confiscation of community property, of 'potent symbols of urban pride', diminished the secular as well as the spiritual life of townsmen more than the disappearance of local monasteries. Chapels, fraternity houses and guildhalls were the main focus of these associations, and therefore the most apparent loss. Guilds were involved in the practicalities of the urban structure, subsidising education, almshouses, bridges and roads. Communal identities and solidarities were also threatened by the institutional changes resulting from the dissolution of chantries and guilds. There was often an organisational hiatus before secular authorities took on these responsibilities.[8] For example, in Worcester the city school, run by the Trinity Guild before 1548, struggled on with occasional closures until it was finally re-founded and re-endowed through the efforts of the corporation in the 1560s.[9]

Some historians have taken a more positive view, and Tittler's ideas in particular have led to a degree of reassessment. Tittler points out that for middling and larger towns the 'restructuring of resources was often far from calamitous', and that the acquisition of new property and responsibilities allowed towns to improve their financial and political positions. His view is that it was only the very small ecclesiastically dominated towns with one-dimensional economies – 'the Cerne Abbases and Ramsays of the realm' – that 'had nothing on which to fall back when dissolution struck' with the consequence that they either lost their uban status or came under lay

---

[8] Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 2nd edn., 1989), pp. 240-2, Cunich 'The dissolution of the Chantries', p. 159, and 'The dissolutions and their aftermath', pp. 232-3.
[9] A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester,* p. 245.

lordship.[10] Alan Dyer considers that there was only 'temporary impoverishment' in towns previously ruled by bishops and abbeys; he takes a positive view of the fact that Lichfield, Boston, Banbury, Tewkesbury and Faversham, like Abingdon, were later able to achieve self-government.[11] He has also suggested that central government saw incorporation as the only way to 'preserve existing activities' in some ex-monastic towns where traditional governing mechanisms had been gravely damaged.[12]

The argument that the dissolution of a major religious house in a town like Abingdon, where the abbey's administrative control was absolute, had particularly grave, perhaps disastrous, consequences for its economy has been long accepted. A.E. Preston, Abingdon's leading historian of the early twentieth century, promoted a gloomy interpretation of conditions in the town. He claimed that the years following the dissolution were 'dark years' and stated that 'the benumbing and paralysing effect of the fall of the Abbey on all local activities and industries was felt for many years, and brought poverty and distress to the town'.[13] He was expressing a widely held assumption that the events of the reformation were inevitably responsible for a wide variety of urban problems, a view that has persisted in popular opinion for many years. In Gloucester the mistaken theory that the abbey had rebuilt the New Inn for pilgrims and so the town suffered from the loss of their custom has been traced back to the eighteenth century. In York the story that 500 paupers were thrown onto the streets in the 1530s has now been discounted.[14] Theories of economic problems in Abingdon have been largely based on the letter sent by Sir Richard Rich to Cromwell

---

[10] Tittler, 'Reformation, resources and authority', pp. 200, 191; *The Reformation and the Towns*, pp. 12, 50.
[11] A. Dyer, 'Urban Economy' p. 344.
[12] A. Dyer, 'Small market towns 1540-1700', *CUH, II.* 445.
[13] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 294. He offered no evidence to support these views.
[14] Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations,* pp. 288-91; *VCH, Gloucester,* IV, 35-41; *VCH, York,* 122-35.

on 22 February 1538, on his arrival in Abingdon to report on the state of the monastery. Rich implied that economic and social problems were already present in Abingdon, rather than a potential result of the dissolution. He wrote that the town was decayed, and that (as an alternative to the discarded plan to adapt the buildings in the precinct into a royal palace) a clothier was willing to lease riverside property, including the abbey's two decayed fulling mills, to provide employment for 'the people and the inhabitants thereabout, which assuredly is a great number'.[15] Rich's motives might be suspect, fitting in as they do with a narrative of monastic neglect and mismanagement, but his opinion has been linked with the words of the borough charter of 1556:

> Our town ... is an ancient and populous town and inhabited by many poor people and is in so great ruin and decay for want of repairing of the houses ... that it is very likely to come to extreme calamity.[16]

However, this statement is also suspect, and 'the extreme language of all petitions on whatever subject' has to be carefully interpreted. It had become a convention to express a town's difficulties in dramatic terms in order to get the required reaction from central government, and precedent may have heavily influenced the men who drafted the town's petition for its charter.[17]

There is no doubt that the contemporary dread of urban poverty and decay had a real basis, and that the fears that were expressed in Abingdon and elsewhere were genuine. This should not lead to an assumption that they had been or were about to be realised. As outlined previously, the indications are that Abingdon's pre-dissolution economy had a secure and broad base and had not suffered any long-term decline. Did the

---

[15] TNA SP 1/129 f.83 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4302280339).
[16] Challenor, p.1.
[17] Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder,* p. 155; Dobson 'Urban decline in late Medieval England', pp. 10-12.

disruptive events of the monastic dissolution have any sustained ill effect on the economic life of the town? How likely is it that the poverty and the decay of housing referred to in the borough charter twenty years later was an accurate reflection of the situation, and if it was, how was it connected with the dissolution of the abbey? There are a number of lines of enquiry that can test whether Abingdon continued to enjoy economic vitality or had economic difficulties, whether or not attributable to the events of the dissolution. The existence of problems might be confirmed by evidence of a growing population of poor and unemployed people. We also need to look for signs of a decline in business activity, in investment, in the provision of social welfare and in the wealth and number of better-off inhabitants.

Employment and population

It was obvious both to the government and to the people of Abingdon that the immediate effect of the abbey's dissolution on the town's economy would mean the loss of employment, patronage and sales of goods and services. The loss of a large household of status probably created some short-term difficulties, although the abbot re-established his household in Cumnor, and Wellesbourne set up his own household in Abingdon. He claimed to Cromwell that he spent more than £6 a week on 'eight or ten messes' a day for 'the household and resort', adding 'the town and country say they were better contented than now. They have cause concerning meat and drink when they come'.[18] This evidence puts ideas about difficulties due to the wholesale redundancy of former abbey employees and to the loss of the abbey's purchasing power in doubt. In general, as has already been demonstrated, the pre-dissolution abbey played a passive rather than a dynamic role in the town's economy, and this

[18] TNA SP 1/130 f.94 (*SPO*, Gale Doc.No. MC4302280564).

mitigated the impact of its removal. Although some industrial activity still continued in the mills on the abbey site, it seems unlikely that much of the town's economic life was dependent on the abbey. As will be discussed below, its loss could be absorbed if the strong and diverse local economy created and sustained employment opportunities.

The opinions expressed by Rich to Cromwell at the time of the dissolution were perhaps not specifically about the loss of the abbey, but more generalised. His concern was that Abingdon was 'well replenished with people' and implied a danger of 'idleness'. The short-term employment available on the demolition of the abbey gives some insight into the local labour market. The work was supervised by the royal clerk of works, Evan Kelway. The team of workmen that he brought with him included a warden of masons (with eleven men including four apprentices) and a warden of carpenters (with five men). The sawyer, the glazier and upwards of thirty labourers paid to work on the demolition site appear to have been recruited locally. The other main beneficiaries of the demolition were men who owned carts; the demand for carts to carry stone and lead to the wharf at Culham for shipping down the Thames far outweighed what was available in Abingdon itself. On the whole farm carts were provided from local villages, but some payments were made for carts from as far afield as Reading, Marlow and Henley. These only did one journey each and must have taken an opportunistic backload on their way through Abingdon. The scale of the work was monumental: 170 cartloads of stone had been moved to Culham, and 40 oaks had been felled and transported to Abingdon for scaffolding, by the end of March. A longer-term benefit for the town was that loads of stone from the abbey were used to improve the road between Abingdon and Culham. This burst of activity

had a limited impact on local employment because organized work at the site ended after May 1538. Fewer than half of the day labourers can be identified with any certainty as townsmen, and this does not suggest an over-supply of casual workers in the town at the time of dissolution.[19]

Rich's response to the perceived threat of unemployment was to promote the lease of the industrial part of the abbey site to a local clothier. Similar schemes to generate jobs and income were started with varying success in other towns, such as Malmesbury, Stamford and Gloucester. In Oxford there was a plan to refurbish Oseney Mill for the well-known clothier, William Stumpe of Malmesbury, who was supposedly aiming to set 2000 people to work. The Dean and Chapter of Christ Church eventually erected a fulling mill at Oseney Abbey but had problems with water supply.[20] Rich reported in February 1538 that a clothmaker called 'Tuckar' who lived in Burford promised to 'expend 100 marks a week in wages to clothmakers of the town' if he secured the lease of the abbey fulling mills. He also hoped to rent floodgates, fishing and the Rye farm. Tuckar cannot be traced in Abingdon and was probably the Burford clothier John Jones.[21] Another letter sent from Burford in March 1538 by a Thomas Cade (the vicar of Burford) lobbying for the same potential lessor says that the bearer already sent wool to Abingdon for carding and spinning, but would now 'set the inhabitants of Abingdon to work if they would work so that they would gain more wages in a few years coming than in 20 years past'.[22] In the event, as will be discussed below, the abbey site went into other hands. Rich may

---

[19] TNA E101/458/1 itemises the 'costs and expenses' of 'Royal works at Abingdon' between 4 March and 18 May. See also *LP,* XIII, pt.2, 1019.
[20] Prior, *Fisher Row,* pp. 52f. There is evidence of later industrial use of the abbey site, see below pp. 142-3.
[21] TNA SP 1/129 f.83 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4302280339). See p. 71 above.
[22] TNA SP 1/129 f.154 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4302280423).

have promoted the lease for altruistic, practical or venal motives, or a mixture of all three, and it is not possible to view his remarks as entirely reliable. It is illogical that John Jones' interest in investing in Abingdon has been interpreted in the past as some sort of indication of the town's decline. It seems unlikely that he would have offered to 'give' Cromwell £20 to buy a saddle for anything other than a business opportunity.

The business activities of John Jones of Burford, who is almost certainly the 'Tuckar of Burford' who approached Sir Richard Rich in 1538, show employment opportunities in the post-dissolution period in a more positive light than has previously been understood. Despite the failure of his plan to lease the abbey fulling mills, he was already a major employer and participant in the town's cloth trade. His lengthy will, made in 1545, includes corn mills, fulling mills, flock mills and lands and leases in the Burford area. As well as eight or nine broadlooms in different houses in Burford, he owned eight or nine broadlooms in Abingdon. Seven of these were 'in my house' in Abingdon, which had a journeymen's chamber, with an eighth in the hands of an Abingdon weaver, William Hedges.[23] Jones was also putting out work in Abingdon, owing Roger Cooke, a master weaver who became his sister's second husband in 1548, over £13. His involvement in the town was personal as well as professional: he left bequests to his sister who lived there with her family, as well as £2 for road improvements and 20s for the poor. He also left money to Adam Pope, one of the masters of the fraternity, and his wife, 'his host' and 'his hostis' in Abingdon.[24] His property in East St. Helen's Street was still in the family's hands at

---

[23] Hedges died in 1552 and left a modest inventory of £7 8s 4d. BRO 10043/AD15/151.

[24] TNA PROB 11 30/360 (4 February 1545). Jones' investment in the town, because he was non-resident and non-taxpaying, was unknown until recent research by the Burford Probate Group. I am grateful to them for the will transcription.

the time of the Amyce Survey, and it seems likely that his sons continued his business in the town.[25]

The potential for manufacturing on the abbey site was realised by William Blacknall, a miller from Swallowfield near Reading in Berkshire who took on the lease of part of the abbey site in 1548. He agreed to repair the abbey fulling mills at his own expense and also to build a new fulling mill, so it seems likely that his overall investment in manufacturing in the town was significant.[26] He was involved with another incomer, a Breton, Francis Owdery, in the development of a new manufacturing business in Abingdon. This enterprise received government support, and coincided with Mason's renewed involvement with the town.[27] In 1550 Owdery is described in the Patent Rolls as 'our chief workman of weaving of our poldavies and oleroundes in Abingdon': he was granted an annuity of 8d per day 'provided he not only works himself but teaches others whom the King shall appoint to him to learn'.[28] Sailcloth had been normally imported from the continent, and the secrets of the manufacturing process appear to have been previously unknown in England. Bruce suggests that Owdery was put in charge of Edward VI's government project to introduce the manufacture of sailcloth to England. The choice of Abingdon for this scheme might be due to a combination of circumstances relating to the supply of flax and hemp and the availability of clothmaking and tanning expertise.[29] In 1558 he was advanced

---

[25] Jones purchased the ex-Fraternity property as well as the garden in West St. Helen's Street which backed on to it, creating a large plot.

[26] The terms of the lease are recorded at the end of the Amyce Survey. TNA LR2/187 f.212.

[27] There is no proof of Mason's involvement but this is an example of what Tittler terms 'particularist' government support, both for the regulation of a specific trade and also towards a specific town. 'The emergence of urban policy', p. 80.

[28] *CPR*, Edward VI, III (1549-51), 310.

[29] *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family,* ed. J. Bruce, pp. 90-93. Sailcloth (often described as poldavies, mildernix or oleroundes, all Breton words spelt in various ways) was linen made from flax and hemp, and the manufacturing process could include tanning. Successive governments continued to try to promote and regulate sailcloth production in England; in 1574 a monopoly was granted for

£100, agreeing by indenture with four officers of the Queen's ships, to deliver sailcloth exclusively to the Queen's stores at Deptford, again with the proviso that he 'teach our countrymen the same craft'. Blacknall stood as surety for the repayment of the loan. Owdery stayed in Abingdon, taking an inventory in 1559 and paying tax there in 1560, but by 1565 he had moved to Ipswich. Blacknall continued to pay off the loan, which was eventually discharged in 1582.

Abingdon continued to be known for the production of sailcloth, or canvas, initially carried on by Blacknall on the abbey site, the rest of which he acquired from Thomas Wroth in 1553. It has been pointed out that Abingdon's own 'mercantile and industrial capitalists' did not pursue cloth manufacturing, and concentrated on other priorities. However, other leading townsmen were associated with Blacknall in a petition to Protector Somerset for the new lease to restore the fulling mill (and for timber and stone for the work). They were Thomas Tonks, Reginald Welford, Gilbert Freeman, John Sympson, and Robert Charlton, described as some of the 'inhabitants of Abingdon ... who have lately begun to make cloth and need a fulling mill'.[30] All these men were established Abingdon businessmen, with a variety of interests, and all but one had been or was to be involved in town government. Although cloth making was not a major specialisation in the town it does appear that, partly thanks to incoming investment by Jones, Owdery and Blacknall, cloth production did not entirely stagnate but continued to offer employment.[31]

---

making sailcloth (in this case called poldavis and mildernix) with Suffolk hemp in Ipswich and Woodbridge which may have had some connection with Owdery's move to Ipswich. N. Cox and K. Dannehl, *Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities 1550-1820* (University of Wolverhampton, 2007, British History Online Edition); Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects,* pp. 40ff.; BRO D/A1/207/38 (inventory of William Powell, clerk to Christ's Hospital, 13 March 1559).

[30] TNA SP 46/2 200-206.

[31] Jackson , 'Clothmaking' pp. 64, 76-7.

Rich's fears of unemployment and population pressure in the town may not have been entirely groundless, because there seems little doubt that the population of Abingdon continued to grow throughout the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The population may have expanded by at least 30% between 1524 and the early 1540s and such growth was enough to create and fuel anxiety about extra demands and stress on local resources. A calculation based on the 1543 subsidy (180 taxpayers multiplied by 6.5) gives a population total of a minimum of 1170 as opposed to a minimum of 900 in 1524.[32] After the 1530s it is possible to be more certain about population levels, although estimates remain rough and ready, based as they are on suspect registration, figures from other parishes, and dubious multipliers. The survival of registers for St. Helen's from 1538 gives a good enough run of records to produce totals of baptisms and burials, from which averaged total population figures can be estimated. This data gives a minimum population total for 1543 of 1133, a very similar result to the 1170 calculated from the subsidy evidence, which includes the small parish of St. Nicholas.[33]

However, demographic growth does not on its own point to either economic success or stress. It can result from inward migration due to economic stress and hardship in the surrounding area. In some towns, such as Stratford-on-Avon, population growth against the background of a static economy has been linked with the growth of poverty, particularly if exacerbated by the immigration of poor country families.[34] Jackson has argued that in the 1540s Abingdon's population grew because of an influx of poor people, and so was particularly vulnerable to 'a severe cycle of dearth and disease'. But a detailed analysis of the deaths shows that the main incomers were

[32] See pp. 75ff for the 1524 subsidy, pp. 152ff for the 1543 subsidy.
[33] See Appendix 1.
[34] A. Dyer, 'Government and Society', p. 90. Jackson, 'Clothmaking' p. 65.

young men and women in employment as servants. This was probably not abnormal and does not indicate that 'significant immigration was occurring from rural areas'. There was no agricultural decline in north Berkshire, which might have forced people out of their villages, and to the contrary, thriving local agricultural productivity probably continued to be a stimulus to Abingdon's economy. Yates found a shift in north Berkshire towards arable farming, though Abingdon wills and inventories indicate significant numbers of sheep in the area.[35] Enclosure was minimal in north Berkshire throughout the period, although the engrossing of holdings for more efficient cereal production also had the potential to take people off the land.[36] Abingdon offered positive economic opportunities to 'betterment' immigrants: employment, housing, and, in a worst-case scenario, charitable provision.

Abingdon's mortality crisis between 1544-6 was by far the worst recorded in the town in the sixteenth century, and this may indicate that the town had become overcrowded. During those years there were about 300 burials, more than double the norm and representing about a quarter of the population. The death rate in these 3 years was respectively 100%, 250% and 120% above the national trend, while the norm in those years was about 25% above trend.[37] It was this high mortality, rather than an economic slump, which steadied population growth in the town. A disproportionate number of younger and poorer people in the town died, as was

---

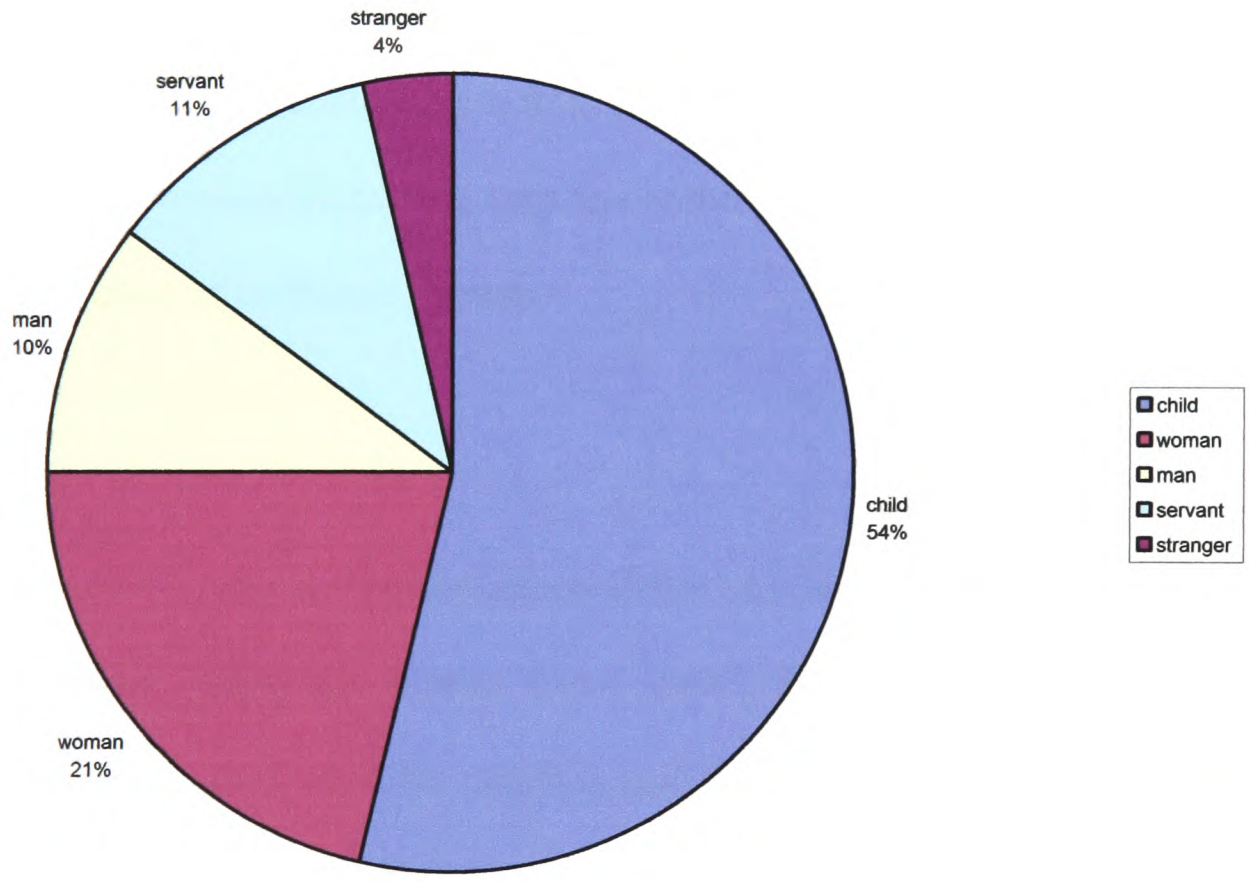
[35] Yates, 'Continuity and change in rural society', p. 113.

[36] Jackson, *'Clothmaking'*, p. 64. The enclosure commission 1517-18 recorded only about 800 acres of enclosure in the two northerly hundreds of Berkshire (Hormer and Ock), more than half of which was arable land. *The Domesday of Inclosures 1517-18,* ed. I.S. Leadam (RHS, 2 vols., 1897), II, 513. By 1600 Abingdon St. Helen was only 10% enclosed, similar to many other local parishes. Wordie (ed.), *Enclosure in Berkshire 1485-1885*, pp. xii, xxx.

[37] E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (London, paperback edn., 1989), p. 653. The plague epidemic moved slowly west from London, peaking in the summer months, from 1543, and was still having a serious impact in Devon in 1546-7. Abingdon's epidemic fits into this progression but Slack points out that identification of plague cannot be absolutely certain, and that other diseases could coincide with 'waves of plague infection'. P. Slack, *The Impact of Plague,* pp. 61, 82, 84.

normal for the plague.[38] A detailed analysis of the peak months of mortality shows an even higher mortality than normal among children and an unexpectedly high mortality among servants. Fig. 9 shows that of the 196 burials that took place between June-September 1544, July-October 1545 and March-June 1546 65% were of children and servants, and only 10% were of adult males.[39]

Fig. 9: St. Helen's, Abingdon: Burials in peak plague months 1544-6



Since the plague had no major impact on the families of leading craftsmen and tradesmen, and new servants continued to be recruited, these distressing years probably had little effect on economic activity and employment in the town.

[38] Slack, ibid., p. 128.
[39] Children's burials in Abingdon tend to account for over half of the total in the average year: in two sample years, 1549 and 1562, they accounted for 54% and 74% respectively. The servants who died were probably aged up to about 25 years old.

Although a number of leading townsmen died between 1544-6 (14 deaths are recorded out of the 180 men and women who paid tax in 1543) this is not disproportionate and few of their deaths can definitely be associated with the epidemic. Thomas Street, shoemaker, who had paid tax on £3 in 1543, and died in 1546 after six other deaths in his household, was an exception. With due recognition of the difficulties of calculating urban populations, the indications are that the population level recovered quickly after the high mortality of the plague years of 1544-6.[40] Registration was erratic in the 1550s but two separate pieces of evidence support a population estimate of up to 1500. St. Helen's parish is said to have had a population of 1400 in 1555.[41] The Amyce Survey shows a total of about 350 inhabited dwellings, and this could give a total population of 1575.[42] These figures can only prove that there were increasing numbers in the town, but the indications are that this was a reflection of economic growth.

Wealth or decay?

Rich had also complained about the decayed condition of Abingdon and this too was repeated in the charter. While the charter refers specifically to 'decay for want of repairing of the houses', Rich used the word to complain more generally about the state of the town in the context of fear for its economic future, as discussed above. There was a strong political motivation for both Rich and the charter petitioners to emphasise a scenario of neglect. Rich had reasons to denigrate the administration of

---

[40] N. Goose, 'Urban demography in pre-industrial England: what is to be done?' *Urban History,* 21:2 (1994), 273-84.

[41] D. and S. Lysons, *Magna Britannia: Berkshire* (London, 1806) refers to a census made for Cardinal Pole recorded in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library. This is untraceable, but figures given in Lysons for Berkshire towns are generally accepted, see Dils, *An Historic Atlas,* p. 50. Ecclesiastical censuses made in 1563 and 1603 do not survive for the Diocese of Salisbury.

[42] This calculation uses a multiplier of 4.5 rather than 6.5: it is clear from the Survey that not every property was inhabited by a tax-paying 'head of household', but some housed widows, sons and servants.

the abbey, and the petitioners for the charter were anxious to take over responsibilities from the Court of Augmentations. Gloomy reports of problems such as those reported in the monastic town of Bury St. Edmunds, with 'decaying and dilapidated tenements and houses, many uninhabitable and producing no rents, and consequently being written off by the court officers as total financial losses' were common and probably exaggerated for similar political reasons.[43] It was not unusual, in any event, for early Tudor housing to be aged, insanitary and decaying, but whereas Leland had frequently noted decay in towns he did not do so when he visited Abingdon.[44]

We have seen that, after a brief hiatus, the town's administration under Wellesbourne was firm and effective. The Minister's Account for 1538 drawn up for the Court of Augmentations shows that an efficient operation was inherited from the abbey. Although property in the town needed and continued to need regular repairs, there is nothing to show that the abbey had been a negligent landlord. Of the rents collected over £95 was delivered to the Crown, after over £6 was allowed for 21 vacant properties and about £5 for repairs to 12 houses and shops. Of all these only four were described as defective, or vacant and not re-lettable. Altogether, including non-residential property, the total spent on property repairs was over £15. Out of 229 properties all but 21 were fully rented and paid up. The rental mentions only two waste plots of land (in the Bury) and one ruinous tenement (in the Vineyard).[45] There is little sign in Abingdon of the derelict and empty building plots that had resulted from depopulation and employment problems in many towns, particularly larger ones. For instance due to economic changes the population of Lincoln had dropped from

---

[43] Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds,* pp. 243-4.
[44] Hoskins, *Age of Plunder,* p. 2.
[45] BRO D/EP7/37 and 38, transcriptions of Ministers Accounts No.109 (1538) and No.110 (1539). For details of the administration see pp. 114ff.

over 6000 people to 300 households (a maximum of 2000 people) in the early 1500s.[46]

Subsequent accounts show a similar pattern of expenditure on repairs and loss of income from vacant properties. In 1539 there were more vacant properties, though this was not stated to be due to lack of repair; money was spent on 17 tenements, and on the two main inns, The Hart by the bridge and the New Inn in the Market Place.[47] In 1546-7 tenants were paying reduced rents for 14 properties, and there were 34 properties (including gardens) which were vacant or where rent was owing for at least a quarter. The account for 1547-8 gives a similar picture but in many cases the properties and tenants are different. A high turnover of tenants, particularly in the poorer houses, was to remain the norm for the rest of the sixteenth century: the 1545-6 plague may have affected demand for houses for a few years. The Amyce Survey shows that in October 1554 there were only nine properties paying reduced rents due to decay, and that in all only eight properties lacked tenants.[48] Wellesbourne and his colleagues probably only had a limited scope to invest in the town in terms of major building works. The 1546-7 account shows that the rent of the New Inn was reduced to £4 from £6 13s 4d because it needed repair, while in contrast in March 1547 the Treasurer of the Court of Augmentations authorised payment of £16 5s for 3 French millstones for Abingdon mills, which indicates that Wellesbourne had generated some industrial activity on the old abbey site.[49] His administrative expenditure was partly

---

[46] A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns,* pp. 42-8; Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 98ff., J.W.F. Hill, *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 22-3.
[47] BRO D/EP7/38.
[48] These properties are varied and scattered - they include a collapsed stable, a garden, a high status site in Bury Street north, a garden with a ruined house, and a group of four tenements in the Vineyard.
[49] Bodleian Ms. Berks Roll 9 and Roll 10 (Ministers Accounts 1546-7, 1547-8). *LP,* XX1, pt. 2, 775.

dependent on rents received, so it was essential to keep property let and in reasonable repair.

One problem that historians have identified in relation to post-dissolution urban administrations is the loss of the institutional charitable support that had been organised by religious houses, chantries and fraternities. In Abingdon poor people, particularly the elderly, continued to receive formal care. The inmates of the New and St. John's Almshouses tended to be connected to the families of local tradesmen, while those of the Old Almshouse were perhaps less respectable. The Old Almshouse was not run by the Fraternity or by Christ's Hospital in the 1500s, so was presumably the responsibility of the churchwardens of St. Helen's church. Almshouse accommodation was maintained without a break in three different places: six rooms in St. John's Hospital in the former abbey precinct, thirteen rooms for seven men and six women in the New Almshouse run by the Fraternity, and twelve chambers for twenty people in the Old Almshouse next to St. Helen's church. This gave accommodation for a minimum of thirty-nine people; in practice married couples shared New Almshouse rooms. They received varying amounts of financial support depending on the status of their accommodation – one shilling per week for St. John's almsmen, eight pence plus a gown in the New Almshouse, while in the Old Almshouse the inhabitants depended on 'the charitable allowance of the good devout christian people' of the town.[50] Despite the loss of the abbey as a source of alms and food, the maintenance of almshouse accommodation meant that Abingdon's elderly poor continued to fare well in comparison to other communities. An analysis of the units

[50] There is good evidence for the continuity of this provision in various accounts: Bodleian Ms. Berks Rolls 9 and 10 (Minister's Accounts 1546-7, 1547-8); CHA, Accounts 1553-1606, p. 14 (the allowance in 1553 is probably the same as was given previously); Cox, *Peace and War,* pp. 77, 121; *VCH, Berks,* II, 92-3.

of almshouse accommodation available in 17 communities of different sizes between 1580-1710 shows that the provision of 39 units was generous for a town the size of Abingdon.[51]

Are there in fact any general signs of a post-dissolution economic depression or of the exodus or impoverishment of leading townsmen that might confirm the gloomy views of Rich or the petitioners for the charter? An analysis of the 1540 and the 1543 lay subsidy returns can tell us about the prosperity of this class. These, tied in with wills, inventories and other records, can show whether the solid core of prosperous individuals indicated in the 1524-5 returns remained in the town.[52]

The subsidy granted in 1540 was levied (in two annual instalments) only on goods and land valued at over £20 per annum, so it focusses on the better-off inhabitants of the town.[53]

Table 2: Wealth of Abingdon 1540

Assessments	**Persons**	**Assessed wealth** (total for the group)
£	no.	£
100 and over	1	200
40-99	4	214
20-39	42	900
Total	**47**	**1314**

[51] Assuming that 7% (98 people) of Abingdon's population of 1400 in the 1550s were over 60, over 40% of the oldest people in the town could have found almshouse accommodation. Archer found the average accommodated in his sample was around 10%. Even when Abingdon's population rose to 2000 in the late 1500s there was still accommodation for over 25%. There is no evidence of an age qualification for Abingdon almshouses. I.W. Archer 'Hospitals in sixteenth and seventeenth century England', in Martin Scheutz *et al* (eds.), *Hospitals and Institutional Care in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Munich, 2008), p. 65.
[52] See pp. 78ff.
[53] TNA E179/73/156 (dated before November 1540).

The tax granted in 1543 (also to be paid in two annual instalments) spread the tax net over a much wider spectrum of the town's inhabitants. It is more easily compared to the 1524 lay subsidy, although there is no assessment on wages. It operated on a similar sliding scale to 1524-5, ranging from 4d. to be paid on moveable goods assessed at 20s, to 2s per £ once the assessment was over £20.[54] There were a large number of taxpayers, a total of 180 (44% more than the 125 in 1524). In addition, there were three payments by the Fraternity, St. Helen's and St. Nicholas' churches (not included in the analysis below). Analysis of the 1540s lay subsidies in towns has not generally been undertaken, so comparisons are not available. Richard Hoyle considers that the 1543 lay subsidy is a 'rather neglected' source, and that it is 'much more than a supplement' to 1524. It has been suggested that increasing numbers of people paying tax 'indicate a society that was becoming modestly more prosperous'. A 6% increase in the number of taxpayers between 1524 and 1543-4 is considered typical, so the 44% increase in Abingdon is a strong indication of growing prosperity.[55]

Table 3: Wealth of Abingdon 1543

Assessments £	**Persons** no.	**Group** £	**Wealth** %
100 and over	1	200	15
40-99	3	194	15
20-39	5	126	10
10-19	32	464	35
5-9	22	143	11
3-4	21	70	5
2	27	54	4
1	69	69	5
Total	**180**	**1320**	**100**

[54] The mechanism of both subsidies is explained in M. Jurkowski, C.L. Smith, D. Crook, *Lay Taxes in England and Wales 1188-1688* (London, 1998), pp. 142-4.
[55] TNA E179/73/164 (6 November 1543). Hoyle, *Tudor Taxation Records: a Guide for Users,* p. 26.

A direct comparison with the analysis of the 1524-5 lay subsidy is not totally straightforward.[56] In 1524-5 only heads of families appear in the list, but in the 1540s some family members of the wealthiest families were assessed separately. This skews the analysis by decreasing the number of very wealthy individuals, and swelling the ranks of the lower categories of taxpayers. This is only significant in two cases: in 1524 Thomas Braybroke, the clothier, was assessed at £80 and in 1543 seven of his children are assessed separately, at a total of £134.[57] Similarly Thomas Mayott is assessed at 100 marks (£66 13s 4d) in 1524 and in 1543 six of his children are assessed at a total of £108.[58]

The greatest change in the 1540s is the inclusion of the wealthiest members of the community, the Reade family of Barton, in the Abingdon figures.[59] Thomas Reade, assessed on £200 in 1540 and in 1543, accounts for 15% of the total assessed wealth in 1543, while the family taken together have a total assessment of £366 in 1543, 28% of the wealth. If the two Abingdon gentry families, the Reades and the Hydes, are added together they account for 39% of the 1543 assessment.[60] These families, taken together with the mercantile Mayott and Braybroke families, account for over half the wealth of Abingdon in 1543.

The 1540 return indicates a solidly prosperous middle class of 47 individuals with property valued at over £20 (instead of 19 in 1524), whereas the 1543 return shows

---

[56] See pp. 78ff.
[57] Thomas Braybroke left each child £20 in his will, TNA PROB 11/29 (26 January 1542).
[58] Thomas Mayott made his will in 1537, and left the sums to his children on which those still in Abingdon were taxed in 1543. TNA PROB 11/27 (13 February 1538).
[59] Thomas Reade was the main beneficiary from the will of Katherine Audlett, widow of the late abbey steward John Audlett (dated 27 November 1539); his sisters and other female relatives inherited cash sums on which they paid tax in 1543. TNA PROB 11/28 (14 January 1540). John Audlett was not assessed under Abingdon in 1524. See p. 76.
[60] Oliver Hyde, member of a large North Berkshire gentry family, was assessed on land worth £66 12s 4d and his two step-daughters were assessed on a similar amount between them.

only 9 in this category. Without the 1540 data it might be concluded that there was a decrease in the number of wealthy men in Abingdon since 1524. However analysis shows that many of the men who paid tax on £20 in 1541 (the lowest amount assessed) paid on a lower assessment in 1543 (when tax was payable on goods valued at as little as 20s). While it is not impossible that people's circumstances were changing, it seems more likely that the assessor was allowing them to slip down a tax bracket in 1543, whereas in 1540 they were not allowed to escape paying tax. For example, four Mayott children paid on £20 in 1540 and on £19 in 1543. However, we cannot assume that the tax assessors worked consistently on these three different occasions.

It is more helpful to look at the large middle band of taxpayers, assessed at between £3 and £39. This band included 80 people in 1543 (as opposed to 47 in 1524) and accounted for 61% of the wealth (as opposed to 42% in 1524). Without the Reade, Hyde, Braybroke and Mayott family members who are taxed on inherited wealth, there are 63 taxpayers in this band in 1543. This indicates that five years after the dissolution there remained a significant, stable and reasonably prosperous middling class in Abingdon in 1543, made up of a broad spread of mercantile tradesmen and shopkeepers, craftsmen and yeomen. Other evidence supports a picture of relative affluence for this group. Twenty years on from the 1524-5 Lay Subsidy, many of these men belong to families who remained important in the town until and after incorporation in 1556. This in itself suggests that the town's economy continued to support the same trades and activities throughout the period. Richard Large, chandler, and Gilbert Freeman, wool dealer and yarn manufacturer, who had both been taxed in the 1520s, continued to trade in the town and both paid tax on high assessments in

1540 and 1543.[61] Robert Welling, saddler (assessed on £4 in 1524, £20 in 1540 and £8 in 1543) left goods valued at £72 10s 8d in 1554; his will mentions his tenement in the Bury 'late purchased'.[62] John Sympson (assessed on £30 in 1524 and only £4 in 1543) died in 1552: his inventory totals over £77, and includes crops and livestock, as well as a warehouse with weighing equipment and 27 lb. of yarn, indicating an involvement in wool manufacturing.[63] His heir appears to be William Sympson who had legal training and had been Abingdon's first town clerk for a year before he died suddenly in the 1557-8 epidemic. His will refers to 'chamber stuff' in a London property but he is termed 'yeoman' and was also involved in local sheep farming.[64] Robert Forman (not assessed in 1524, assessed on £20 in 1541 and £8 in 1543) was a yeoman farmer who owned an important dwelling house, the Bull, probably an inn, in the Bury and was termed gentleman in his will in 1557.[65] Joan Tonks, the widow of a chandler, paid on £30 in 1540 and only £5 in 1543 (although this lower assessment may be because she had re-married and her sons were also paying tax) while her late husband had paid tax on an assessment of £40 in 1524.[66]

The 1543-4 subsidy, unlike that of 1524, was levied on the value of people's goods and not on their wages. Those assessed on £2 (27 people) and £1 (69 people) account for just over half the number taxed, and only 9% of the town's wealth. Those who can be identified include husbandmen and labourers, a glover, a parchment-maker, a cutler, a cooper, a butcher and a barber: they all appear to be men running their own

---

[61] See p. 82.
[62] BRO D/A1/7 MF10040/74 (will of Robert Welling, 20 August 1554). The inventory total is written on the will so no detail survives: the only indication of wealth otherwise is a gold signet ring left to his son.
[63] BRO D/A1/212/23 (inventory of John Sympson, 28 August 1552).
[64] TNA PROB/11/39/305 (will of William Sympson, 31 August 1557).
[65] TNA PROB 11/39 (will of Robert Forman, 28 October 1557).
[66] TNA PROB 11/30 (will of Joan Tonks, 1 July 1545). She was wealthy enough to leave 62s. to various churches.

businesses. This group includes men who later had respected positions in the town: Robert Overthrow who paid on 20s was a baker and a Christ's Hospital Governor from its incorporation in 1553 until his death in 1557, and John Langley (also assessed on 20s) was a linen draper by the time of his death, also in 1557. These less well-off people of the town were assessed and paid tax in exactly the same proportions in 1543 as in 1524, but in 1543 some wage earners would not have been taxed. It is therefore very likely that there were a large number of people below the tax-paying threshold who were in some sort of employment – journeymen, apprentices, servants, as well as those without regular work.[67]

The subsidy evidence has shown that the town's major employers continued in business despite the uncertainties of the post-dissolution era, including the parchment maker and the plumber-glazier, both of whose workload must originally have been largely dependent on the abbey. Taken together, analysis of the 1540 and 1543 subsidies does not provide any conclusive evidence, when compared with the 1524 lay subsidy, to support a theory that Abingdon suffered a significant economic slump following the dissolution.

Which occupations were the main wealth generators in the town? The analysis shown below of the middle band of 63 taxpayers in 1543, who paid tax on assessments of £3 to £39, gives an indication of the occupational structure within this better off group of townsmen.

[67] Thomas Street, a shoemaker who paid subsidy on an assessment of £3, had at least three servants who died in the same month in 1546.

Shopkeepers/wholesalers	
Drapers	9
Chandlers	4
Mercers	3
Tailor	1
Agriculture	
Yeomen/husbandmen	8
Leather	
Tanners	3
Shoemakers	2
Saddler	1
Hospitality	
Inn-keepers	3
Building	
Plumber/glazier	1
Metal	
Tinker	1
Cutler	1
Clothmaking	
Yarn manufacturer	1
Master weaver	1
Dyer	1
Food	
Butchers	2
Miscellaneous	
Barber	1
SUB-TOTAL	43
[Not known	20]

The activities of the town's distributive traders, particularly drapers, have already been noted. This listing highlights the continuing importance of Abingdon's trading function. Drapers account for between a fifth and a quarter, an unexpectedly large proportion, of those whose occupations are known within this group of better-off townsmen. Evidence for their successful business enterprises is reinforced by some of the few wills and inventories that survive for this period. Nicholas Bolt, draper, had a very prosperous business when he died in 1546: he had goods in his shop and warehouse valued at over £40 and £20 in ready money. At his death he was owed money by 80 different men in towns and villages within a radius of 10 to 18 miles of

Abingdon.[68] His widow Joan married another draper, John Bostock, who died in 1550. His inventory and account show an equally active business, with a hundred pounds worth of goods in his shop and £40 owed to him: his executors were able to pay out over £70 of legacies. A total of £30 of 'sperat' (hopeful) debts were due from men 'in London and other places'.[69] Joan herself died in 1559, having been married to another draper and widowed again, leaving an inventory totalling £106, showing that the family business had been consistently profitable for at least 13 years. Something of the prosperity and activities of Abingdon's mercantile class can also be seen in the details of an alleged ambush of four leading townsmen in November 1549 on the highway to Henley-on-Thames, the main route to London. These men had a wide variety of business interests and were Thomas Bisley, gentleman, John Cossam, tanner, Thomas Medowe, innholder, and Richard Mayott, draper. Three Abingdon men were accused (together with a yeoman from Cambridgeshire) of the robbery of cash totalling over £20 and gold rings worth £5 8s.[70]

The listing above also shows a broad spread of profitable occupations, and the number of successful yeomen and husbandmen underlines the important contribution made by the 'consistently prosperous' local agriculture.[71] Agriculture was important to the local economy at all levels. Among the Berkshire gentry John Audlett's widow Katherine left bequests totalling over £500, plus sheep and cattle. Robert Delwood, the tenant of Banbury Court in West St. Helen's Street, left high quality possessions: his local landed interests were left to his wife who remained in Abingdon and remarried Oliver Hyde, Abingdon's first M.P. in the 1550s. Delwood originated from

---

[68] BRO D/A1/2 Dandridge 80 (will of Nicholas Bolt, ?1546) and D/A1/39/33a (inventory, 20 April, 1546).
[69] BRO D/A1/175/19 (inventory of John Bostock, 14 April 1550).
[70] *CPR*, Edward VI, II (1548-9), 246.
[71] Yates, *Town and Countryside,* pp. 27, 36.

Flint in Wales, and had married as his third wife Anne Eyston, member of a local gentry family.[72] At a lower social level Alice Astenden, widow of a Shippon husbandman, left goods totalling £77 9s 10d in 1547 (over £60 of this was represented by livestock).[73] Agriculture was a common second occupation. Adam Pope was an ostler in addition to farming 45 acres; his inventory total in 1546 was over £29. Pope's will makes a rare mention of agricultural rights attached to some, possibly many, of the houses in the town: the 'maintenance of a cow in the commons of Abingdon pertaining to my house'.[74] Thomas Perkins, a tailor in Ock Street who died in 1557, left goods appraised at over £14 including a sow, two pigs, a cow and an acre of wheat in the field.[75]

All the evidence points to a continuity in terms of wealth levels and numbers of better-off townsmen between the pre- and the post-dissolution period. This does not necessarily mean that there were no significant levels of poverty in the town. The combination of population growth and the loss of monastic almsgiving could have caused a greater polarisation between the haves and the have-nots in the post-dissolution period. The evidence does show, however, that there was a wealthy class that could afford to add informal support to the town's institutional provision for the poor. An indication of local needs can be found in the charitable giving to the poor in wills of this period. A widow, Thomasine Hore, left 6s 8d directly to the New Almshouse and 4s to the Old, as well as 20s for the poor at her funeral and month's mind. John Jones of Burford left it to Adam Pope to distribute 20s 'to certain poor people as he shall think most expedient and needful', while Elizabeth Braunche, a

---

[72] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Robert Delwood, 28 June 1540).
[73] BRO D/A1/2 Dandridge (will of Alice Astenden, 27 September 1546).
[74] BRO D/A1/103/81 (will of Adam Pope, 15 April 1546).
[75] BRO D/A1/207/22 (will of Thomas Perkins, 6 July 1557).

draper's widow, left a piece of 'bardowe' sail to make children coats and cassocks for her 'to be prayed for among the poor people'.[76] Katherine Audlett's will planned for £200 to be spent on her burial and memorial masses, but she did also leave £8 13s 4d p.a. for ten years for the poorest people in the town.[77] In 1557 Katherine Hyde left £100 to be loaned out to clothiers for poor spinners, weavers and fullers 'the better be set on work' in the town.[78] This last legacy, a generous but conventional response to worries about poverty, might indicate that the cloth-working sector of the community was facing particular difficulties. There are only occasional hints of the strategies that poor people needed to survive. It appears to be the norm that women nursed the dying: in 1559 three women who attended the death of Helen Overthrow got into trouble about bequests made to them in her nuncupative will. Women also took on a distasteful and dangerous task in caring for plague victims in the Street household in 1545. Richard Backhouse was one of Street's apprentices; he left to the 'four poor women that now keep me a sheet and 12d each in memory', and a red petticoat to the poor woman who had taken care of Margaret Smyth, servant to Reginald Welford, who also died at the Streets' house.[79] However, there is in general no evidence that the dissolution in Abingdon exacerbated normative levels of hardship and poverty in the way that Preston described.

Conclusion

The evidence available to us shows that, while poverty and decay were present in post-dissolution Abingdon, it was not due to administrative neglect or economic

---

[76] BRO D/A1/2/264 (will of Thomasine Hore, 13 July 1548); TNA PROB11/30/360 (will of John Jones, 4 February 1545); BRO D/A1/12 (will of Elizabeth Braunche, 15 June 1556).
[77] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Katherine Audlett, 14 January 1540).
[78] BRO A/A26 p.367. She was the daughter of Abingdon tradesman Thomas Barker, first married to the clothier Thomas Braybroke (died 1541) and then to John Hyde of Sutton Courtney. Her gift appears in the Register of 'special benefactors' to the Borough made in 1598. Challenor, p. xxv.
[79] BRO D/A1/2/71 (will of Richard Backhouse, undated). Todd, 'Widowhood in a market town', p. 61.

decline, and was at a containable level. Abingdon was sustained by the strength and diversity of its economic life as a marketing, manufacturing, agricultural, hospitality and thoroughfare centre. The importance of the continuity of traditional functions to counteract the effects of religious upheaval has been noted in other ecclesiastical towns of differing importance and size, such as Bury St. Edmunds, Gloucester, Faversham and Lichfield. Bury St. Edmunds was a larger town than Abingdon but similarly situated: it was an 'attractive and prosperous provincial centre' in a sound economic position due its role as major marketing centre for the prosperous agricultural region of West Suffolk and cloth production in the Stour valley.[80]

The strength of Abingdon's economy counteracted the effects of the post-dissolution political and administrative limbo. However, despite the efficiency of the interim stewards of the town, this was undoubtedly a difficult period of stagnation for the town's leaders. As Tittler points out, many small ecclesiastically-dominated towns lost their urban status in the sixteenth century if they failed to move 'toward economic restructuring', and 'greater local autonomy and legal authority'.[81] The nearby town of Thame in Oxfordshire had a very different experience when lordship passed quickly from religious to secular authority. Sir John Williams promoted the town's economic expansion against a background of local farming prosperity.[82] It is not clear how much economic growth there was in Abingdon during this period apart from the cloth manufacturing activities of Jones, Blacknall and Owdery. Survival probably occupied the leading businessmen of the town rather than development, faced with

---

[80] R.S. Gottfried, 'Bury St. Edmunds and the populations of late medieval English towns 1270-1530', *Journal of British Studies,* 20:1 (1980), 1-31; *VCH, Gloucester*, IV, 35-41; E. Hasted *A Historical and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent* (12 vols., 1797-1801) VI, 318-71; *VCH, Stafford,* XIV, 14-24.
[81] Tittler, 'Reformation, Resources and Authority', p. 191.
[82] *VCH, Oxon,* VII, 178-93.

administrative uncertainty. This situation can only have been exacerbated by the dissolution of the fraternity in 1548, when the local representatives of the Court of Augmentations became the sole source of formal administration in the town, taking on the responsibility for the bridges, the new almshouse, and adding about another hundred properties to its rent roll. The emphasis made on economic problems by the townsmen in their petition for a charter was no doubt a true representation of their desire for the 'bettering' of their town. This has given a misleading impression that the town was in dire economic straits in the early 1550s but this was an acceptable and conventional argument using the rhetoric of the day to support their case. Their prime objectives were to prevent and manage social and economic problems in order to safeguard their leading role in the political reconstruction of the town.[83]

[83] Challenor, p. 1.

Chapter 6

Changes in Property-holding and Social Structure 1538-56

We have seen that the emergence of new institutions, the borough of Abingdon and Christ's Hospital resulted from a happy convergence of government policy and local ambition. The strength of the community lay with its leading businessmen, many of whom later became the governors of Christ's Hospital and the burgesses of the borough. They were committed to the economic development of the town on which their own economic and social standing depended. The town's leading families also had the most to gain from the acquisition of property which accompanied the transfer of authority, both in terms of the grants to Christ's Hospital and to the borough, and as individuals. To what extent, by the 1550s, had the townspeople of Abingdon acquired, in these different ways, the former properties and resources of the abbey and the fraternity? The traditional perspective towards the dissolution period has emphasised its discontinuities, and in terms of dissolved lands and property has generally focussed on sales made by the Court of Augmentations to non-resident gentry. Tittler has emphasised the importance of following through the disposition of property and other assets to third parties, although his focus was largely upon institutional acquisition. This type of investigation is often limited by the patchiness and complexity of sources, but research has shown that the initial disposals of ecclesiastical and chantry lands seldom tell the whole story. For example, in Coventry it was not until the 1570s that the City Corporation was able to acquire a large ecclesiastical holding that had been sold after the dissolution to a court official from Hertfordshire. In York it has been found that although early purchasers of dissolved properties were outsiders, many of these properties were before long in the

hands of citizens.[1] Abingdon's rich documentary material gives the opportunity to shed more light on the general question of the transfer of urban property after the dissolution. This enquiry can be extended beyond the town's institutional property to include properties acquired by individuals. What proportion of the abbey and the fraternity holdings was passed on to the borough and the hospital? How much property went into private hands, and who were the ultimate purchasers? The answers to these questions will then allow us to enquire into how the changes in property holding affected the town's social structure.

Post-dissolution property transfer: the Amyce Survey

The Amyce Survey has already been mentioned as a source for pre-reformation holdings in Abingdon.[2] The survey, augmented by the rent rolls and grants of the Court of Augmentations since 1538, along with Christ's Hospital documents, gives the opportunity to examine the transfer of property ownership in detail as it stood in 1554. The survey, conducted by Roger Amyce, dated 2-6 October 1554 was made in advance of the town's incorporation, and gives a detailed listing of property.[3] It was not intended to be generally descriptive, and omits well-known buildings, spaces and landmarks, such as the market house and cross, the market area, the new almshouse, the churches and bridges. The main part of the text is expressed as a perambulation through the streets, starting from the bridge over the Thames, and introduced under the heading 'Abingdon town, a parcel of the possessions of the former monastery of the blessed virgin Mary in Abingdon'.[4] The properties are set out street by street, and

[1] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 46-55, pp. 103ff.; *VCH, City of York* (1982), pp. 117-8, 357-65.
[2] See pp. 94ff above.
[3] TNA LR2/187 ff.196-214. See p. 28 above.
[4] Ibid., f.196.

every property is included, not just those granted to the new borough.[5] There are 445 entries in the survey, mostly but not all tenements. Each entry in the perambulation gives the following information:

> the tenant's (or freeholder's or owner's) name
> how the property is held (at will, freehold, claims freehold, letters patent, purchased, or copyhold)
> a description of the property (tenement, garden, orchard, shop and so on)
> the previous recipient of rent (where the property is still held by the Court of Augmentations in 1554)
> the current recipient of rent (where the property has been granted or sold by the Court between 1538 and 1554)
> the amount of rent due per annum

The following is included for some properties:

> The occupier (if different from the first named) or sub-tenant
> The name of the previous tenant
> The plot size in feet.

The Amyce survey proper, the perambulation, does not include all the properties considered as farms in their own right. There is a lack of consistency which can create confusion: four farms, two granted to the corporation (Fitzharris and Linge's farm) and two to Christ's Hospital (Lacy's Court and St Helen's Mill) are mentioned in the main text. Others, including the largest and formerly most important property, the site of the former monastery, are treated separately from the perambulation in parenthesis under the general heading of 'the site and precinct of the former monastery as well as of mills fisheries and other demesne land there'.[6] The text of this section of the survey appears to be based on that of the relevant letters patent, and the detailed descriptions are not contemporary with the main survey, or with each other. This section appears to have been put together as an afterthought to complete the survey:

---

[5] Hamlets - Shippon, Northcourt and Barton - that are outside the borough boundaries but in the parishes of St. Helen's and St. Nicholas' are not listed.

[6] Ibid., ff.211-214: Fitzharris and Linge's farm are described in detail in this section. The Christ's Hospital farms are omitted; Calcot (or Caldecott) is not mentioned anywhere in the Amyce Survey, but was held as a farm with St. Helen's Mill by Richard Smythe at a total rent of £14 13s 4d.

the description of the abbey site is written in English, instead of the Latin of the rest of the survey. It may have been added in 1562, when the borough accounts record the following payments: 'to Mr. Amyce clerk at the sitting of inquiry of Abbey lands and house 3s 5d' and 9d for a gift of sugar to Mr. Amyce.[7]

The ownership of every property holding had changed as a result of the dissolution process. The transfers that are recorded in the survey fall into two main categories: firstly the institutional properties that had already been granted to Christ's Hospital in 1553 and were about to be granted to the new corporation; secondly the properties (including the abbey site) disposed of by the Court of Augmentations to a variety of private individuals, both townspeople and outside investors.

The Christ's Hospital property portfolio largely retained the characteristics of the old fraternity holdings in the town. The fraternity had held 73 properties in the town, including six let as freeholds. The hospital had been granted 54 ex-fraternity properties (including the same six let as freeholds) in the town, as well as a few remaining outlying properties. In addition 15 ex-abbey properties were granted to replace twelve (possibly thirteen) ex-fraternity properties in the town, which had been sold off by the Court of Augmentations since 1548, ranging in quality from cheap to high rental values.[8] This accounted for almost all of the former fraternity holdings. The balance of the fraternity holdings, and also the properties that had previously

---

[7] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, f.42.

[8] Totals vary slightly between the Amyce survey and two different Christ's Hospital rentals depending on whether holdings are split or combined, and the inclusion of fishing rights. Occasionally there remain confusions that cannot be reconciled. There are a small number of discrepancies: for example the tenement called the 'Brotherhood House' in East St. Helen's Street, said in 1547-8 to be tenanted by Thomas Welford for the high rent of 40s, and granted to Christ's Hospital in 1553, with the same tenant in place, is missing from the Amyce survey. CHA, Survey of properties granted 18 May 1553; Minutes, f.1.

belonged to the Chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary at St. Helen's and the Chantry of St. Toll's at St. Aldates in Oxford and remained unsold, altogether about 40 tenements, gardens and pieces of land, were later granted to the new corporation and not to the hospital. In the event well over 80% of the fraternity's property holding remained intact when it came into the hands of Christ's Hospital in 1553. The hospital controlled, as had the fraternity before it, about 15% of privately held property in Abingdon, as well as the bridges and the new almshouse.

In contrast, although nearly all of the properties granted to the new town corporation had once belonged to the abbey, the abbey's original dominant interest in the town had been diluted between 1538 and 1556. The abbey had received rents directly from at least 320 properties out of the 445 listed in the Amyce survey, in numerical terms over 70% of holdings in the town. By 1554 the Court of Augmentations had sold 46 ex-abbey properties, so with the 15 granted to the hospital this meant 61 ex-abbey properties in all had been disposed of, representing just under 20% of the abbey's holding in the town. In addition between 15 and 25 new freeholds had been granted, an increase to about 70, from a previous total of something between 43 and 56. Many of the properties that had been released were in the best locations and paid the highest rentals. In the Bury fourteen out of the thirty-three former Abbey properties had been sold, and the New Inn (now called the Antelope) had been granted to Christ's Hospital. The corporation was granted about 60% of private property in the town, but a quarter of the tenants were freeholders, who paid minimal quitrents and were effectively independent. The annual fee farm that became due to the Crown from the borough was based on the projected rental income from the properties granted by the charter (£102 16s 7d p.a.), so on the face of it the disposals had no major effect on

borough finances.[9] However the disposal of many of the better quality ex-abbey properties meant that the corporation became responsible for a higher proportion of poorer at-will tenants paying low rentals and living in houses that needed repairs. More to the borough's advantage was the control of the market place including the town's only public building, the market house. The charter gave the town the right to have a 'Common Hall which shall be called the Council house', and the market house was the corporation's first meeting place.[10] The charter granted the corporation the reversion of the leases of the former abbey's water mills, fulling mills and fisheries. By an exchange of these for premises to the south of the abbey gateway in 1560, the new corporation was able to establish its own administrative premises on the former abbey site.[11]

As far as private property within the new borough is concerned, by far the largest holding was the former abbey site itself. Despite the transfer of over 80% of the abbey properties in the town to the corporation, the former abbey site remained in private ownership, and its disposal, whether intentionally or not, resulted in its permanent loss of status. William Blacknall, a businessman from Swallowfield near Reading with milling interests, was renting property in Abingdon by 1548, and in occupation of the main site by 1553.[12] Externally the precinct retained its medieval features; the outward aspect remained largely unaltered with walls, ditches, and gates that were locked.[13] Despite the demolition that had taken place in 1538, there were

---

[9] Challenor, p. 33.
[10] Challenor, p. 11.
[11] ABA, Verney Deeds, 21. The premises had been St. John's Hospital and included the almoner's hall and court, the hospital ward and various chambers. The Corporation also obtained the porter's lodge and the room over the abbey gateway.
[12] ABA, Verney Deeds, 6 and 10. The Blacknall family retained their Abingdon property until Mary Blacknall's marriage into the Verney family after her father's death in 1625.
[13] Agnes Baker, *Historic Abingdon,* p. 42.

still many structures in the precinct, including several houses, gatehouses and numerous domestic and industrial buildings.[14] The Blacknalls sold stone and lead off the site, and focussed on the commercial activities of mills, fisheries and maltings. There was little development in the town east of the Stert, despite population pressure, and the precinct remained by and large separate, unpopulated and undeveloped.

In the town the piecemeal sale of individual ex-abbey and fraternity properties resulted in a striking alteration to property holding in the built up part of the town. Before the reformation there had been between 50 and 60 properties in the town held as freeholds, paying quit rents. By 1554 a minimum of 60 properties had been sold representing at least 15% of property in the town, and there were now over 75 freeholds old and new.[15] It has generally been assumed that all ecclesiastical properties surrendered to the crown were effectively up for offer on an open market. The Patent Rolls detail many long and often random collections of rural and urban properties put together as bulk purchases by individuals. These purchases have invariably been interpreted as speculative, and Youings pointed out that it is important to pursue the history of the ownership of such properties in order to trace the genuine purchasers.[16] In some towns such as Reading, where a member of the local gentry bought 179 messuages (about 40% of the tenements in the town) in 1545, houses were purchased in large blocks by investors, but this is not what happened in Abingdon.[17] But as far as Abingdon is concerned, where the Amyce survey and other records can occasionally trace the process in which properties came into the hands of individuals,

---

[14] By 1579 many of these buildings had disappeared, including the abbot's lodging. BRO D/EP 7/36.
[15] This calculation leaves about 10% of the properties listed in the Amyce Survey unaccounted for: some were in the hands of local churches, others may have been sold and the ownership is not clear.
[16] Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries,* pp. 19, 130-3, 126-9.
[17] Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth,* p. 270; Martin, 'The People of Reading and the Reformation, 1520-70', p. 370.

it appears that the real sequence of events was more purposeful and more complex. Some, perhaps many, purchases by intermediary agents were neither random nor speculative, but by arrangement with local private purchasers.

One such purchase that can be fully traced was made for William Clerk, a husbandman, who is named in the Amyce survey as the purchaser of two properties in Ock Street. These had been the only Abingdon properties in a very large collection purchased in 1550 by a two-man syndicate, William Fountayne and Richard Mayne. The parcel included properties in a wide variety of localities and came to a total value of over £1800. The properties are described as 'two messuages with houses, shops etc. in the tenure of William Clerk in Ock Street in Abingdon, previously belonging to the Fraternity'.[18] By 1554 the Amyce survey makes no mention of the intermediary owners, and it seems far more likely that Clerk pre-arranged the purchase from Fountayne and May than that one single Abingdon property was randomly included in their collection. The purchase is confirmed by Clerk's will, in which he left one house to his widow and thereafter to his son; the other he had already sold to John Mose his son-in-law for £12.[19] Oliver Hyde, the only member of the local gentry living in Abingdon, must have set out in a similar way to purchase two adjoining properties in West St. Helen's Street, previously tenanted by his wife's late husband. The Amyce survey shows Hyde as the purchaser of Banbury Court (described as a 'capital messuage') and of the adjoining barn, dovecote and close. Banbury Court had been part of a parcel granted in 1545 to Edmund Harman, the king's barber-surgeon; the adjoining property was one of many originally purchased by Sir Thomas Denton,

[18] *CPR*, Edward VI, II (1548-9), 382.
[19] BRO D/Al/ 51/181 (will of William Clerk, 6 January 1565).

Abingdon's under-steward and recorder.[20] In another example, a property in Littlebury Street which Thomas Medowe held from the fraternity was purchased along with seven other fraternity properties, as part of another large parcel by another two-man syndicate, William Sall and William Bridges. This property resurfaced in 1571 when sold by William Medowe to Christ's Hospital, so presumably Thomas Medowe had purchased directly from Sall and Bridges.[21]

The Amyce survey, unfortunately, was made only part of the way through the process of property transfer in the town, so we have an incomplete picture. Where agents are shown still in ownership of the tenements they had purchased from the Court of Augmentations, there is generally no way of knowing when the properties were sold on, or to whom. This is the case for some of the nine messuages in Bury Street purchased in 1553 by Thomas Wren and Edward Slegge, gentlemen from Cambridgeshire, as part of a large collection of properties valued at over £1500.[22]

The transfer process, however, for what was by far the largest parcel of Abingdon properties to be sold is more easily understood. Thomas Denton, lawyer, local gentleman and the town's understeward, bought about 40 properties, ranging from some high status tenements to a lot of gardens, in every part of the town. On the face of it he was assembling a rather scattered property portfolio, and this is what has previously been assumed. But it now seems clear that he acted as an agent for townsmen who wished to buy a house or a piece of land, generally where they were already tenants. Some properties had been sold on before the Amyce survey was completed: Oliver Hyde's acquisition is discussed above, and two other tenements, a

[20] *LP*, XX, pt. 1, 846.15; BRO D/EP/94.
[21] *CPR*, Edward VI, III (1549-51), 102; CHA, Accounts, 1571 and 1572.
[22] *CPR*, Edward VI, V (1553), 218.

messuage and a garden in Littlebury Street, had been sold to the Tonks family.[23] The will of William Whittington, a tailor who died in 1557, shows that he had already developed a tenement and garden in Stert Street originally purchased by Denton: 'I give and bequeath all my tenements lately built in the garden in the Stert ... and all that orchard lying in the Stert next to the tenement on the north side'. Whittington bequeathed all his properties in Abingdon to his wife, so he had probably purchased the two shops in the Bury where in 1554 he was also Denton's tenant.[24] Thomas Jennens, a woollen draper who died in 1560 bequeathed a house in his will, probably the house in the Bury where he too was Denton's tenant in 1554.[25] Another tenement in the Bury, the house next door to Thomas Jennens, had been purchased by its former tenant, Robert Welling, a saddler, before he made his will in August 1554. The will refers to the 'messuage or tenement with appurtenances I now inhabit in the bury which I late purchased ... of Thomas Denton Esquire and Richard Hobingham yeoman as by their deed made bearing date 25th March 35 Henry'.[26] Another Denton purchase, a garden ground in Bore St, had changed hands twice by 1559 when Joan Langley (previously Bolt and Bostock) the widow of three different Abingdon drapers, left 'my land or garden ground which I purchased' to her eldest son John Bolt.[27] Roger Rosier is shown in the survey as Denton's tenant, renting a garden in Broad Street, which he or his widow must have purchased: his widow Ann Rosier left the garden ground with 'thappurtenances' to her daughter 'for ever' in 1565.[28] In all there is documentary evidence that about a quarter of the Denton purchases were quickly sold on to his tenants, so it seems reasonable to assume that his apparently

---

[23] Amyce Survey, f.201.
[24] BRO D/A1/3/Batell 269 (will of William Whittington, 20 October 1557).
[25] BRO D/A1/8/E194, MF10043/C (will of Thomas Jennens, 21 April 1560).
[26] BRO D/A1/7/74, MF10040 (will of Robert Welling, 20 August 1554).
[27] BRO D/A1/91/55a (will of Joan Langley, 10 June 1559).
[28] BRO D/A1/8/E349, MF10043/C (will of Ann Rosier, 20 April 1565).

random collection was made largely on behalf of townsmen who wanted to buy the houses and gardens that they already rented. It seems unlikely that Denton retained any property in Abingdon after 1555, when he granted two small tenements to Christ's Hospital to pay for a yearly sermon; he moved to Buckinghamshire where he died in 1558.[29]

By the mid-1550s, then, what were the effects of the complete transformation of the property holding landscape of Abingdon? Many ordinary townspeople during the period had simply exchanged one institutional landlord for another in 1538, and then another in 1553 or 1556. But in the interim better-off townspeople and a number of outside parties had invested in town property, either on their own account or on behalf of third parties. Although it has to be said that many of the details of the property transfers remain unknown, the integration of the Amyce survey with other records allows us to answer a number of questions. Had the leading families of Abingdon gained significant advantages from the redistribution of property and resources in the years after 1538? Were there outsiders who took a long-term interest in the town? What effect did this have on Abingdon's society?

Post-dissolution society

The detailed information contained in the Amyce survey offers the opportunity to assess how the town's society had developed by the end of the post-dissolution period, when a significant amount of property transfer had already taken place. This touches on wider questions about the re-ordering of Abingdon's lay society after the dissolution. The great abbey household had essentially been a separate structure and

[29] CHA, Accounts, p. 4 and account dated 1555.

the abbot and monks had their own objectives and interests, which were generally far removed from the life of the town. Nevertheless, the abbey had interacted from the highest to the lowest social levels with lay urban society, and its removal created a social opportunity at the top of the urban hierarchy. The status of the town's elite had been based on wealth and social position in pre-reformation Abingdon, related to family, wholesale trades, the fraternity and quasi-civic office. By the 1550s the status of this elite was poised for enhancement through their official standing in the town's new institutions. Hence we need to ask whether post-dissolution developments changed anything, or merely served to reinforce the lay social structure that already existed in Abingdon before 1538.

The previous chapter has suggested, in relation to the post-dissolution economy, that there was strong structural continuity between 1524 and 1543. Taxation and occupational evidence demonstrated that a small group of gentry and merchants, backed up by a large and reasonably affluent group of mercantile tradesmen, shopkeepers, craftsmen, yeomen and husbandmen continued to live in the town.[30] In 1543 there were at the least sixty-three men and women running profitable trade, craft or agricultural businesses. In addition a proportion of the ninety-six townspeople paying tax on lower assessments were self-employed, with less profitable occupations, or at the start or end of their careers. The rest of the ninety-six were probably employed men, old enough and paid enough to marry and rent a house, older servants, or journeymen.[31] A handful of gentry and mercantile families who were more important and wealthier than any of these 160 or so townspeople lived in or on the edge of town. At the other end of the scale were wage-earners (the servants, the

[30] See pp. 154ff.
[31] See pp. 155f for a discussion of the crafts and trades of men assessed in 1543 on 20s and 40s.

labouring classes, the hirelings and casual workers) and, the least economically significant, the unemployed and the unemployable poor. Boulton, writing about social structure in seventeenth century Southwark, suggests that in the absence of any specific local evidence, taxation records at least reveal a hierarchy of status through the 'familiar pyramidical distribution of wealth': merchants and chief retailers first, then most retailers and all handicrafts men, then labourers and hirelings. Alan Dyer points out in his discussion of sixteenth century Worcester society that 'although still hierarchical, it was related in a fairly simple way to differing levels of wealth'. [32] It could certainly be argued that the men and women who paid tax in 1543 were in a separate economic group because they could support themselves with a degree of security; in Abingdon's commerce-based society this placed them in a social group that separated them from the poorer classes.

Subsequent taxation records are less informative, but the Amyce survey, supported by the evidence in institutional and probate records, can tell us more about the better-off and more important townspeople and what they did. [33] The survey shows who paid the highest rents, who held freeholds or had purchased properties, and where they lived. In the less prosperous areas of the town the cheaper properties are listed along with the more anonymous and poorer men and women who lived in them. While social position was obviously not wholly dependent on the rental value or location of townspeople's homes and places of work, this data is as valuable as other indicators of social hierarchy, such as occupational evidence. As Boulton points out: 'without

---

[32] Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society,* pp. 108, 100; A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester,* pp. 173ff.
[33] In 1560 less than 40 taxpayers are recorded, the richest townspeople only. TNA E179/74/216.

intensive local research it is rarely possible to assign a precise economic and social standing to a man described by a trade' in urban society.[34]

Does the Amyce survey data confirm continuity in the structure of Abingdon society between 1543 and the 1550s? Apart from William Blacknall's presence in the abbey precinct there is very little evidence of change. Out of *c.*80 freehold properties in all, many of which pre-dated the dissolution, a number were held by non-residents. These were mainly representatives of local gentry families who had connections with the town, and included members of the Hyde, Yate and Braybroke families. James Braybroke held 15 properties, mostly freeholds, but the family had moved away from Abingdon after the death of his father Thomas in 1541 and his widowed mother had married a member of the Hyde family in 1543.[35] The majority of freeholders were established members of the town community and held only one or two properties.[36] As far as the known purchasers of property are concerned, Table 4 below shows that many of these were from leading families in the town and only one (John Jones) was an incomer.

In 1543 an analysis of taxation paid identified a large middle band of 63 taxpayers who could be classed as 'better-off' (but not as well-off as the Reade, Hyde, Braybroke and Mayott families).[37] The Amyce survey shows that these same better-off people can be identified in terms of how they held their property and what rent they paid. For example, there were at least thirty-two individuals who had purchased tenements, plus another ten more who paid the highest rents in the town of 26s 8d and

---

[34] Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society,* pp. 100ff.
[35] See p. 79.
[36] The exception was an unidentified man, Thomas Gold, who held eleven freeholds.
[37] See pp. 154ff.

over for theirs. In addition there was a group of 'farmers' and copyholders whose interests were in land around the edge of town, and six or seven innholders who paid high rents for town centre properties. There were at least twenty freeholders and tenants of freeholders who clearly belonged to the category of the 'better-off': among these were businessmen in the Bury such as Thomas Erle, John Bostock and the Braunche family, all woollen drapers, and John Cary, a very prosperous chandler. John Cary's inventory in 1559 totalled £162, including £122 in ready money; his daughter and heiress married Thomas Mayott, a member of Abingdon's premier mercantile family, in 1560.[38] This 'better-off' group numbered at least 75 people in 1554 and provided all but one of the first hospital governors and high burgesses.[39] The exception is John Chantrell also Clerk, who was a scribe and became a much-respected public servant. He acted as clerk for the hospital between 1560-80, and became mayor in 1576. His wealth never matched his status, and he was granted a pension of £3 p.a. and forgiven a debt of nearly £7 when he resigned from the corporation in 1580, 'being of great age, weak and feeble of body and decayed in substance'.[40]

---

[38] BRO D/A1/51/161 (will of John Cary, 21 June 1559; inventory, 11 July 1559).
[39] See Table 5.
[40] CHA, Preston, Ms. Notes on Masters and Governors of Christ's Hospital.

Purchasers of tenements (alphabetical order)	Occupation	Location	Purchased through	Other purchases	Indicators of wealth and/or status
Allyn Roger	husbandman	Ock St	Thomas Denton	land via Denton	secondary burgess
Bostock Humphrey	draper	Ock St	Wm Sall	2 gardens via Denton	master of fraternity; burgess;
		Bury	Thomas Windsor	Bury (Bourchier & Wiseman)	governor of Christ's Hospital
Bostock Ralph		Ock St	Denton	2 gardens via Denton	burgess
Bright Isobel als Goldsmith		Bury St	Slegg	garden via Denton	
Clerk William	husbandman	Ock St	Fountayne and Mayne		inventory £23 (1567)
Echill Thomas	cutler	Bury	Denton		inventory £18 (1557)
Evysham Richard	former abbey prior	W. St. Helen's	Denton		pension £22 p.a.
Fisher James	grocer	Bore St	Denton	Bore St, Denton	governor CH; burgess
		Bury St	Thomas Windsor		
Fisher Michael		Bury St	Slegg		
Franklin Elizabeth		Ock St	Denton		
Goodwin Robert als Sawier	ironmonger	Bury	Denton	3 gardens via Denton	
Harper Henry	plumber/glazier	E. St. Helen's		garden backing on via Denton	
Hyde Oliver	gentleman	W. St. Helen's	Denton	Adjoining ten. (Edmund Harman)	first MP; governor CH
Jarrett William		Bury St	Slegg	garden via Slegg	
Jennens Thomas	woollen draper	Bury St	Denton		burgess
Jones John	clothier of Witney	E. St. Helen's			non-resident
Keling William	innholder	Stert	Denton		master of fraternity
Large Richard	chandler	Bury	Denton		burgess invy £13 (1558)
Mathew William	mercer	Bury St	Thos Mores		governor CH; burgess
Mayott Richard	draper	Bury St	Thos Reade	*Reade may have retained property*	master frat.; gov. CH; burgess
Medowe Thomas	innholder	Littlebury St	Wm Sall	garden via Denton	governor CH
				storehouse via Ward & Planner	
Rosier Roger		Bury St	Thomas Windsor	garden via Denton	
Simpson William als Ible		Bury St	Denton		*Table continued on next page*

Continued from previous page					
Smith John		Bury St	Wren and Slegg	tenant Matilda Bellingham	
Tesdale Richard	?saddler	Bury St	Slegg		governor CH
Thatcher Alice		Littlebury St	Denton		
Tonks Robert		Littlebury St	Denton?		
Tonks Thomas	chandler	W. St. Helen's	Denton	garden via Denton	governor CH; burgess
Welling Robert	saddler	Bury St	Denton		inventory £72 (1554)
Whittington William	tailor	Stert	Denton	Bury St (Denton)	burgess
Williams John	?glover	E. St. Helen's	Denton		
Wilmot John	draper	Bury St	Thomas Reade	*Reade may have retained property*	father of Witney wool merchant

Table 4: Known townsmen who purchased tenements 1538-1554

(This page is blank)

Town government of Abingdon 1550s:	1553 - Governor Christ's Hospital	1556 - Burgess of Abingdon	Tenements purchased in Bury	tenant in Bury	purchased elsewhere	tenant elsewhere	1543 - tax assessed on	business activities	comment
Oliver Hyde gent*	x				x		£66		based at Banbury Court
Thomas Reade gent	x			4 freeholds	x	x	£200		based at Barton House
Thomas Bisley gent	x			1 freehold		x	£15		
Richard Mayott*	x	x		3			£20	draper	tenant of Christ's Hospital
William Mathew*	x	x	2			x	£20	mercer	
Humfrey Bostock	x	x	2		x	x	£15	draper	
John Shene	x					x			died 1553
James Fisher	x	x	1		x			grocer	
Robert Overthrow	x					x	20s	baker	elderly
Thomas Tonks	x	x		1 freehold	x	x	£10	chandler	
Thomas Medowe	x			1	x			innholder	Antelope, Bury
Richard Ely		x				x		innholder	Lamb, Ock St
William Blacknall		x				x		miller	based in abbey precinct
Thomas Orpwood		x				x		innholder	George, Ock St
Ralph Bostock		x	1		x		£8	draper?	
Thomas Jennens*		x	1			x	£10	w. draper	
John Chantrell als Clerk		x				x	40s	clerk/scribe	clerk of CH 1560-80/mayor 1576
William Whytington		x	1		x			tailor	

* lent money for Christ's Hospital Charter

Table 5: Property interests in the Bury and elsewhere: the first men to hold office in Christ's Hospital and the Borough

The 1543 tax records also identified a lower stratum of ninety-six townspeople who were a mixture of less well-off craftsmen, tradesmen and the better-off employed. This group is less easy to extract from the Amyce survey, which lists all the householders in the town in 1554, but the analysis of the rental value of properties can help identify them.[41] Forty-eight individuals paid relatively middling rentals between 10s and 24s; many of these can be identified as tradesmen and craftsmen. Eleven of these men had paid tax on 20s in 1543, and two more on 40s. Only a very few tenements at this rental level were purchased by their tenants, who were better-off men. Richard Large, chandler, and Robert Welling, saddler, both bought their 16s tenements in the Bury via Thomas Denton. Large rented two other tenements and paid tax on £10 in 1543; Welling paid on £8 in 1543 and left goods worth £72 in his 1554 inventory.[42] Many more householders in this category were probably the tenants of freeholders, but the terms of their tenancies are not recorded in the survey.

There was a further group of about seventy householders who paid less than 10s rent p.a, renting tenements 'at will' in 1554, and mostly soon-to-be tenants of the new borough. There are inevitably some anomalies in terms of social and economic status: William Simpson was the first town clerk, and Richard Evysham (whose property was purchased by Denton presumably for his use) had been the last prior of the abbey, and both paid low rents, which may have been concessionary. The group of seventy includes eleven widows, as well as labourers and weavers. There may have been additional tenants of freeholders about whom we know nothing, as well as multiple occupancies.

---

[41] In Abingdon after the 1550s there are examples of householders in the lowest rented properties receiving rent relief. See pp. 227-9.
[42] BRO D/A1/7 MF10040/74 (will of Robert Welling, 20 August 1554).

The type of analysis that has been extracted and outlined above from a source like the Amyce survey is inevitably both rough and ready and flawed, but perhaps no more so than the conclusions that can be drawn from taxation sources. The results of the analysis of the 1543 lay subsidy and that of the Amyce survey are sufficiently similar to confirm the identification of the upper echelons of a sixteenth century community. It is inevitably more difficult to understand ordinary households of the lowest orders – the virtually invisible members of society, who are not recorded elsewhere, and whose occupations are not known. The Amyce survey lists over 350 tenements, although a few of these may not have been occupied or residential. The conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis given above concurs with what has been observed elsewhere. In Coventry in 1520 the elite together with independent tradesmen and craftsmen accounted for something over 40% of the town's householders, while Barry similarly suggests that up to half of the householders in a community could be of the 'middling sort'.[43] In Abingdon upwards of 125 of householders, perhaps even half of them, (about 175), could claim to be economically secure or independent. Of these it seems unlikely that there were more than 75 householders who enjoyed social status through their occupation, income and housing. Half or more of the town's householders (at least another 175) probably depended on employment. Many of these householders were poor labourers or widows who occasionally or frequently struggled to support themselves, depending on health and employment. The survey tells us nothing of the non-householders of Abingdon; we can assume that an equally wide social division probably existed between the householder and the non-householder in the town.[44]

---

[43] Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* p. 39; Barry and Brooks, *The Middling Sort of People,* p. 3.
[44] Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society,* p. 100.

The Amyce survey can be used to confirm these assessments of relative status by linking properties to tenants. Table 6 shows all the properties with the highest known rental values (those over 26s 8d) described as tenements (this excludes inns, mills and land).

Table 6: Amyce Survey: Rentals of 26s 8d and over

Address	current or recent rent pa	tenant	Main occupation (if known)	O = owner-occupier (purchased 1538-1554) T = tenant	1543 taxed on	inventory
corner of Bury	40s	Thomas Davy		T		
Stert	33s 4d	William Keling	innholder	O	£5	
West St. Helen's	46s	Oliver Hyde	gent	O	£66	
East St. Helen's	26s 8d	James Walter	dyer	T		
East St. Helen's	26s 8d	John Lane/Fisher	fisher	T	40s?	
East St. Helen's	33s 8d	Henry Harper	plumber/glazier	O	£3	
East St. Helen's	32s	John Jones	clothier of Burford	O		
Bore St	26s 8d	Thomas Eyres		T	£8	
Ock St (2)	26s	William Clerk	husbandman	O	£3	£23 1567
Ock St	26s 8d	William Cornish als Burnett	parchment maker	O	40s	
Ock St	26s 8d	Thomas Bowland	tanner	T	£5	£2 1561
Ock St	33s 4d	John Cossam	tanner	O	£8	£55 1558
Bury	26s 8d	George Tugwell	tailor	T		
Bury	26s 8d / 40s	Richard Mayott	draper	O	£20	
Bury	30s	Richard Chester		T		
Bury	26s 8d	William Ible als Sympson	draper	O		
Bury	26s 8d	Thomas Milles	shoemaker	T	20s	
Bury	33s 4d	John Browne	cooper	O	20s	
Bury	26s 8d	Thomas Echill	cutler	O	£8	£18 1557
Bury	26s 8d	George Smyth	blacksmith	T		£22 1567
Bury	26s 8d	Humfrey Bostock	draper	O	£15	
Bury	40s	Thomas Tonks	chandler	T	£10	
Bury	43s 4d	James Fisher	mercer	O	£8?	
Bury	26s 8d	Michael Fisher	?mercer	O		
Bury	26s 8d	Richard Tesdale	saddler	O	20s	
Bury (2)	54s 4d	Isabel Bright als Goldsmith		O		

The table shows that 16 out of these 26 properties had been purchased since 1538. It is not surprising that tenants who could afford high annual rentals might be able to afford or be able to borrow towards the purchase price. There is evidence for one such transaction. When Thomas Echill, cutler, died in 1557 he left his house which had been an abbey tenement and which he had purchased via Thomas Denton to his

wife Jane. His inventory includes a debt to Oliver Hyde of over £18, and by 1565 Jane and her then husband Thomas Clerk had sold the house to Oliver Hyde. It seems likely that Echill borrowed the money to buy the house in the first place, quite possibly from Hyde himself.[45] Echill was a member of the group of 63 higher taxpayers in 1543, and was probably typical of this better-off middling class; more than half of the men shown in table 6 had been taxpayers in 1543.

Table 4 on pp. 179-80 shows a list of the 32 known purchasers of tenements. In both table 4 and table 6 at least half of the properties concerned are in the Bury. It seems reasonable to assume that many of the properties in the Bury area for which we lack rental values (either because the pre-sale rental value is unrecorded or because we have only freehold values) were of similarly high value and status. Analysis of the men who became office-holders in the 1550s confirms the Bury as the main focus for most of them. Ten out of the 18 first members of the two town governing bodies were owners or freeholders in the Bury.[46] There were about 50 properties in the Bury (including Bury Street), which was heavily built up with little or no spare land.[47] At least eighteen of these properties had been purchased from the Court of Augmentations by 1554: over a third of the Bury was now owner-occupied. At least fifteen more were new or old freeholds: this meant that only about a third of the tenements in the high status town centre were now under institutional control. Table 7 below shows the distribution of businesses known to have been carried on at premises in the Bury in 1554.

---

[45] BRO D/A1/65/38 (will of Thomas Echill, 7 August 1557, inventory undated); TNA PROB 11 48/376 (will of Oliver Hyde, 4 May 1565).
[46] See Table 5.
[47] See Fig. 2. Table 4 shows that some townsmen based in the Bury bought the gardens they lacked away from the centre of town.

Table 7: Businesses in the Bury 1554

Category	**Type**	**Number of businesses**
Distributive	draper	12
	mercer	1
	grocer	1
Artisan shopkeeper	chandler	3
	ironmonger	1
	cutler	1
	shoemaker	4
	joiner	1
	cooper	1
	tanner	1
	smith	1
	saddler	1
Food and drink	vintner	1
Services	innkeeper	4
	tailor	2
	barber	2
Miscellaneous	woodcleaver	1
Not known		13
TOTAL		51

A presence in the profitable town centre continued to confer prestige on Bury properties, about a quarter of which were drapers' premises. Members of the distributive trades had a significant requirement for capital and tended to be the wealthiest businessmen in towns, so it is to be expected that their premises were in the best positions and that they were often prominent in ruling elites.[48] This analysis gives further confirmation of the importance of the activities of Abingdon's distributive and hospitality function.

[48] A. Dyer 'Small market towns, 1540-1700', p. 441.

An analysis of the properties and tenants in Stert street, a minor thoroughfare running along the abbey precinct's west wall, gives a contrasting picture. At the Bury end on the abbey side there were some higher rents paid by men with their own businesses: a vintner, a specialist smith, a wheeler, the schoolmaster, a fuller, a hatter and a turner. Opposite them were stables belonging to a draper who lived in the Bury, and Robert Carter's bakery business. The Vineyard end was more rural, with tenements, gardens and closes held by better-off businessmen (including Whittington the tailor and Milles the shoemaker from the Bury), a yeoman called Dringe, and Thomas Reade of Barton Court. In between were poorer people paying low rents for their tenements: nothing is known about those named in the Amyce survey.[49] This mixture of different classes of properties and tenants is typical of all the streets outside the Bury area. In Worcester, where there were three times as many households as in Abingdon, in ten parishes, there was a similar range of classes in the poorer areas. The central area (with two principal shopping streets rather than one) was where the rich were tightly concentrated, as they were in Abingdon.[50]

Conclusion

Abingdon's continued occupational diversity due to specialist retailers and craftsmen has already been noted in relation to its economy. This factor, along with the significant number of distributive traders is indicative of the lively commercial life of an entrepôt that brought an unusual degree of sophistication to a relatively small town.[51] An analysis of the Amyce survey confirms that the structural elements of the lay society of post-reformation Abingdon were very little affected by the dissolutions.

---

[49] Some later tenants of these properties worked as day labourers for the borough, as recorded in the Chamberlain's Accounts. Most of the properties in Stert Street passed from the abbey to the borough; they may originally have been built for abbey servants.
[50] A. Dyer, *The city of Worcester,* p. 178.
[51] A. Dyer, 'Small market towns', pp. 441-2.

However, there were important shifts in town society, due to what was effectively the transfer of lordship from the abbey to the borough and the hospital. Those men who became office-holders also became responsible in the 1550s for the town's institutional property, which amounted to about 75% of all the property in the town, excluding the former abbey precinct. The result was that many townsmen effectively became the tenants, either institutionally or in some cases privately, of members of the town elite. Although the hospital and borough's new holdings bear a strong similarity to those of the fraternity and the abbey, a detailed analysis of surviving records shows an increase in private freeholds and purchases that transformed the property-holding landscape of the town.

Another important aspect to the elevation of the town's elite had been the opportunity for better-off individuals to invest in residential and business property. This had the effect of ensuring the continuity of elite families and the integration of their own businesses more strongly with the future success of the town. We have seen that there was already a strong correlation between location and status, and this was now to be reinforced by property acquisition. Of the eighteen men who were the first governors and first burgesses, eleven had purchased at least one ex-abbey or ex-fraternity property. Between them they owned 24 properties, and in addition they retained 21 pre-reformation freeholds.[52] All but two of these men (Blacknall and Whittington) were from established elite families.

The survey illuminates the details of post-dissolution property transfers in the town to the new hospital, to the new borough and to private individuals. Abingdon's new

[52] See Appendix 4.

property landscape illustrates how much this period of unusual innovation and opportunity had worked in the favour of the town's elite on both an institutional and a private level. This was undoubtedly a contributory factor in the polarisation of society that has been observed in many sixteenth century urban communities. In Abingdon this tendency was cushioned by a thriving middling group of townspeople, as will be discussed further in a later chapter. The administration and acquisition of property in association with the political, economic and social opportunity of office holding can be viewed as part and parcel of a time of positive change for the town's leading families.

Chapter 7

Religious and cultural change 1538-56

The last three chapters have concentrated on governmental and economic factors, and in these respects we have seen a pragmatic response from Abingdon's leading townsmen during the post-dissolution period. Their core concern was to safeguard the town's production, marketing and trade. Their aim was to take part in negotiations to provide a sound basis for the town's development, an ambition that offered security to the whole community as well as to themselves. They emerged at the end of a period of threat and destabilisation with new formalised powers to protect and promote their interests. In terms of practical administrative, economic and social developments it can be readily demonstrated that Abingdon's response to change showed no signs of crisis, but was opportunistic and positive.

Can this relatively happy picture of peaceful and successful management of reformation change in Abingdon give us the whole story? This chapter brings us to questions raised by the historiographical debate about the progress and popularity of religious and cultural change in the reformation period. The religious and cultural life of a town can appear to be of minor importance in comparison to its much better documented administrative and economic activities. The elusive nature of the evidence that might show how such change was received in a community makes tentative conclusions inevitable. This is particularly the case in Abingdon due to the lack of evidence such as original churchwardens' accounts. This tension between good and poor evidence for aspects of the effects of the reformation in towns helps to explain why some historical narratives settle for 'urban history with the religion left

out'.[1] And yet we have to engage with the religious and cultural changes that were an integral part of all the other challenges that faced towns during the reformation period.

The narrative of urban reformation change, especially in monastic towns like Abingdon, is dominated by the suppression of intercessory institutions. These had a complex role in their localities, and it is difficult to disentangle the impact of religious and cultural change from the other ramifications of the dissolutions. But religious houses and chantries were first and foremost religious institutions, and their worldly importance should not diminish their spiritual and cultural significance to the community. The dissolutions were only one aspect of the process of national religious reform that started in the 1530s and ebbed and flowed for many years. Any discussion of the development of the urban post-dissolution community would be incomplete without asking questions about local responses to the reformation.

Historians have interpreted the dissolution period as a shocking and iconoclastic series of losses. Landmark buildings were destroyed or secularised, and monastic intercessory prayer ceased along with the chantries that had been founded in monastic churches. According to the testimony of Robert Aske 'when the abbeys stood the people not only had worldly refreshing in their bodies but spiritual refuge'.[2] The process of monastic dissolution has been seen as the starting point for an unsettled period of religious and cultural changes in many localities. The dissolutions in particular and the reformation in general had the potential to bring emotional and psychological instability to communities.

---

[1] P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640*, p. 4.
[2] S. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: the Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603* (London, 2000), p. 127.

In the past historians have suggested that a national dislike of monasticism negated any public sympathy for the dissolved institutions. Jeanette Martin, writing about the dissolution in Reading, believed that ingrained resentment against monasticism was part of Reading's urban consciousness, and that it therefore must have been a shock when its focus vanished almost overnight.[3] The sudden and destructive sequence of events during the dissolution period certainly had the potential to alarm and destabilise a conservative community. However, recent research suggests that dislike of the religious orders was not as strong as had been previously thought. The public did not necessarily agree with reformers that monasticism was fraudulent or superstitious, and regretted the loss of prayers and charitable activities. Claire Cross speculates that there is enough evidence in the case of Roche abbey to suppose that if 'left to their own devices' neither monks nor local laity would voluntarily have relinquished their abbey, accustomed as they were 'for almost four hundred years to look upon Roche as a source of spiritual power, as an influential landlord and employer, perhaps even as a patron of the arts'.[4] The monasteries were representative of a traditional religious life under general attack; the re-establishment of dissolved monasteries was one of the religious demands made by the Pilgrimage of Grace.[5] The minor uprising in Exeter in 1535 at the priory of St. Nicholas was directly caused by the arrival of workmen to dismantle the roodloft in the priory church. It seems most likely that local reactions varied according to individual circumstances: Eamon Duffy suspected ambivalence in the feelings of 'the man and woman in the pew' at Morebath about the disappearance of the already decayed Barlinch Priory.[6] Personal views usually remained private; as far as communities are concerned Whiting's

---

[3] Martin, 'The people of Reading and the reformation', p. 14.
[4] Cross, 'The last years of Roche abbey', p. 240.
[5] Haigh, *English Reformations,* pp. 147ff.
[6] Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath,* pp. 89f.

general conclusion was that 'resistance was less common than acquiescence and cooperation' towards religious changes imposed by central government.[7] Shagan identified a contradiction found among ordinary people who 'accomplished deft feats of cognitive dissonance, accepting and profiting from the dissolution of the monasteries while simultaneously lamenting the decline of [intercessory prayer] one of monasticism's central functions'.[8]

It is generally thought that the second wave of dissolutions in the late 1540s, which suppressed chantries, guilds and fraternities, affected the fabric of urban life much more severely than had the monastic dissolutions.[9] This sweeping away of traditional religious practice, along with the prohibition of processions and removal of images, attacked both the spiritual and the cultural foundations of communities.[10] Duffy has suggested that these secondary dissolutions were an 'act of oblivion'. Shagan has emphasised the 'revolutionary' aspect of the Chantries Act, which dismissed purgatory as an ignorant 'superstition' and did away with prayers for the dead. This also meant the loss of the parish bede-roll, the lists used regularly to pray for the dead, which he considers had 'unified the living and the dead of the parish in a single, seamless community' that was both spiritual and social.[11] Seasonal rituals that had important cultural as well as religious connotations were effectively abolished.[12] Many parishioners probably resented the ending of activities and the confiscation of

---

[7] Whiting, *Local Responses to the English Reformation*, p. 102.
[8] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation,* p. 236.
[9] Dickens, *The English Reformation,* pp. 240-2; P. Cunich, 'The dissolution of the chantries', pp. 159-74.
[10] See pp. 53-9 above for a discussion of the fraternity's role in Abingdon.
[11] Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars,* p. 494; Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation,* pp. 236ff.
[12] R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, paperback edn., 1996), p. 85.

assets they had endowed and considered integral to community identity.[13] Their acquiescence has been associated with a decline in the popularity of intercessory institutions, although this might have been in anticipation of their disappearance.[14] Historians have speculated about why people collaborated with the dissolution of the chantries in the same way as they did with the monastic dissolutions. The populace might have been too fearful to resist, or had become adaptable to religious change. For some, as had happened in the 1530s, self-interest was a motivation: 'many were willing to contribute to the collapse of intercessory institutions if they themselves rather than the government reaped the rewards'.[15]

Some historians have emphasised the varied and localised nature of popular response: 'every parish had its own reformation'.[16] Palliser pointed out thirty years ago that 'not only is too little known of popular opinion, but also of its variety, which can only with difficulty be forced into the strait-jacket of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' labels'.[17] In Abingdon we have a chance to test some aspects of the historical debate. What were the realities of the situation for Abingdon? Did the urban community face a profound religious and cultural challenge in the face of the sequential losses of the abbey and the chantries? What was the speed of local reformation change and was it met with resistance or acquiescence? Was reaction conservative or progressive? Despite the sparse nature of relevant surviving documentary material that has already been noted, we can come to some speculative conclusions.

---

[13] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 118.
[14] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation,* pp. 241ff.
[15] Haigh, *English Reformations,* pp. 172f., Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation,* pp. 236-7.
[16] Haigh, *English Reformations,* p. 18.
[17] D.M. Palliser, 'Popular Reactions to the Reformation during the Years of Uncertainty' in C. Haigh (ed.), *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 113.

The dissolution era in Abingdon: the impact of religious and cultural change

The abbey had been very well known, and its proximity had conferred a fame and reputation on the town. The loss of such a focus for prestige was inevitably a blow to the general population. The town was left with little but commerce to give it status and character. In a town like Abingdon in a county like Berkshire, where religious change conformed to the prescribed national pattern without open dissent, there is very little evidence of its impact. The populace took no known united stance, but it seems probable that there was a wide variety of local reactions and views during the period of change that started with the removal of the abbey.

The dissolution of Abingdon abbey was the townspeople's first known encounter with the reformation. The proximity of Oxford and the town's position on major roads makes it likely that they knew all about what was happening elsewhere. Some monastic towns like Tewkesbury and Reading experienced reform directly, the first through the influence of the local bishop and the second through the abbey itself. In other towns it is known that there was resistance to reformist preachers.[18] Historians have speculated that some people may have been receptive to religious reform in a locality where Lollard traditions of 'literacy, lay piety and of alternative religious structures' are thought to have survived.[19] There is no evidence to confirm that the people of Abingdon had early direct contact with reforming ideas and policies, and none that they were receptive to them.

---

[18] C. Litzenberger, 'The coming of Protestantism to Elizabethan Tewkesbury', in P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (London, 1998), p. 80; Martin, 'Leadership and priorities in Reading', pp. 118-21; Haigh, *English Reformations,* p. 150.
[19] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters in Early Modern Berkshire', pp. 7-12, 311.

The speedy destruction of the spiritual life of the abbey underlines central government's opposition to the monastic way of life. It has been suggested above that the immediate demolition of the prestigious abbey church and associated buildings was a political act to demonstrate an emphatic end to the abbey's power.[20] It is likely that it was also intended as a psychological rebuff to any local religiously conservative opposition to the dissolution. The departure of the monks and the demolition of the abbey church combined emphatically to end the abbey's institutional intercessory function.

The experience of the dissolution process in Abingdon was harsh compared to that of some other communities. The commissioners responsible for organising the surrender of religious houses had orders to pull down all churches and monastic buildings, but as it transpired the treatment of the sacred areas of dissolved institutions was variable, ranging from total and partial dismantlement, to conversions. In some communities the conversion was for parochial use, such as at Christchurch and Sherborne, both in Dorset. In Tewkesbury the town's laity was already using the abbey church for parish worship, and it was saved from demolition when the town's elite purchased it in 1543.[21] In the majority of cases the destruction and re-ordering of monastic sites was probably viewed as sacrilegious, especially when the sacred areas were converted. Malcolm Airs describes some early acquisitions and conversions, carried out by officials connected with the Court of Augmentations, as 'brazen'. Richard Rich and Lord Sandys both incorporated the monastic church naves into their new country houses at the former Augustinian priories of Little Leez in Essex and Mottisfont in Hampshire in the late 1530s. Airs found that most purchasers remained cautious

---

[20] See p. 110.
[21] Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity; Gloucestershire 1540-1580,* pp. 17, 49.

about developing monastic sites for many years, often converting only domestic buildings, and disguising monastic origins. It is possible that both fear of iconoclasm and worry about property being restored to the church may have put purchasers off further investment. [22]

There do not seem to have been reservations about recycling or redeploying domestic and industrial buildings or building materials. The opportunity to purchase monastic property proved to be one that swayed any dislike of religious change. Financial and social progress attracted small-scale buyers in the same way as it did the purchasers of estates. In south Yorkshire a yeoman remembered in 1567 that 'I did see all would away: and therefore I did as the others did'. He had been asked why he had been 'so ready to destroy and spoil the thing that you thought so well of?'.[23] Such pragmatism was typical, especially once opposition to the monastic dissolution had been proved futile after the failure of the Pilgrimage of Grace. A minor example, in 1537, was the removal of a window from Barlinch priory to Morebath church. The acceptance of this gift from the new owner of the priory site tells us nothing about local reaction to the dissolution of the priory in 1535.[24] In Abingdon day-labourers and carts were readily available to work on the demolition in 1538, and the site provided building materials in the long-term, for example in 1549 for Somerset House.[25] Harry Harper, the Abingdon plumber-glazier, was paid for melting down the abbey lead, but this

---

[22] M. Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House* (Stroud, 1995), pp. 27f., 135. Fears about land being restored to the church may also have put purchasers off further investment.
[23] *Tudor Treatises*, ed. A.G. Dickens, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 125 (1959), 123-26.
[24] Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath,* p. 90.
[25] See p. 123. The site continued to provide building materials as can be seen in the Borough Chamberlain's Accounts, for example for repairs in 1593. ABA, Vol. II, f.87.

does not tell us whether or not he or any other Abingdon workmen were in agreement with the dissolution.[26]

In Abingdon in 1538, once the notion of turning the abbey site into a palace had been rejected, there was no question of any parochial re-use of the abbey church itself, partly because there was already an adequately large and important town church. The Abingdon townspeople may well have hoped that the abbey would become the residence of a layperson of status, providing employment and patronage on the same scale as the abbot. In the event both the spiritual and worldly status of the site of Abingdon abbey was lost. Former monasteries or ecclesiastical sites in towns were less attractive than those on country estates, and if converted into houses these were generally more modest mansions for merchants, gentry or administrators, such as Whitefriars at Coventry.[27] Over the next few years the Abingdon precinct was gradually downgraded; it fell into various degrees of private, industrial and domestic use, and in some parts there was disuse and dereliction. Local people who did not necessarily mourn the end of the life of the abbey may have had a vicarious pride in the abbey's importance, and have regretted the obliteration of this important feature of the town's built environment. Historians have identified a slowly growing nationwide sense of nostalgia, evoked by ruins and memories, for the monastic way of life.[28] Much later Abingdon's loss was expressed as follows: '[the] famous Abbey one of the Glories of England and Reproaches of Sacrilege'.[29]

---

[26] TNA E 117/14/182.
[27] Clark and Slack, *English Towns in Transition,* p. 146.
[28] M. Aston, 'English ruins and English history: the dissolution and the sense of the past', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 36 (1973), 231-55.
[29] E. Ashmole, *The Antiquities of Berkshire* (3 vols., London, 1719), III, 111.

Although the demolition of the monastic heart of the abbey might have been a psychological blow for Abingdon people, their first-hand experience of the dissolution was peaceful. No resistance against the suppression is recorded, but there are indications that this might have been anticipated. John Wellesbourne reported in February to Cromwell that 'the abbot that was, his monks and servants are so contented that there is no grudge in word and deed in town and country'.[30] Later that month he wrote that the tenants of Abingdon 'be well content' and that 'I do not hear of any man grieved for dissolving of the abbey'.[31] Official correspondence has already been mentioned in the context of local reaction to the change of administration, and the need to reassure Cromwell that the local situation was under control.[32] Wellesbourne's remarks do indicate, however, that the ejected monks were far from being the object of general dislike, and that their well-being was a matter for general concern. There may have been worries about the loss of the spiritual presence of the abbey that were sharpened by more practical fears about the continuity of administration, the maintenance of education and charity and the loss of employment and income.

A new look at the relevant evidence shows that the end of monastic life in Abingdon did not cause a complete break in interaction between the former monks and the local community. Remnants of the spiritual life of the abbey are found in terms of continuing social, cultural and religious contacts with the laity of the town and its environs and with local clergy. This interaction is further proof of a warmer relationship between the abbey and the town than has previously been supposed. In all nine Abingdon monks, one third of the twenty-seven who signed the surrender

---

[30] TNA SP 1/129 f.36 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4302290275).
[31] TNA SP 1/129 f.98 (*SPO*, Gale Doc. No. MC4302280366).
[32] See pp. 116-8.

document, are known to have stayed in the area.[33] Former monks had dispensations to get livings to supplement what were in some cases inadequate pensions.[34] Four of Abingdon's former monks took on formal pastoral responsibilities and continued to live in the town. They were older men, and possibly this encouraged them to remain close to their former home.[35] Until 1547 two of them were employed as chantry priests, appointed by the leading laymen of Abingdon, John Cristall at St. Nicholas and William Asshenden at St. Helen's in the chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In 1547 William Asshenden was granted a £7 pension to add to his £7 pension awarded in 1538.[36] John Clyffe, clerk, paid a rent of 21s 4d for a property in Stert Street in 1538-9, where he is thought to have run a school which succeeded the abbey school.[37] Richard Evysham, rector of nearby Sunningwell, (formerly the prior), rented a property in West St. Helen's Street, which was later purchased for him or on his behalf by Thomas Denton.[38] Evysham was the most important of these four and evidently retained his social status; he was overseer of the will made by Robert Delwood, his gentry neighbour, at Banbury Court in September 1538. Delwood left him 'my mourning black gown and the hood with all and 10s. to pray for me'.[39] At least two other ex-monks remained in the vicinity, Robert Bery 'priest' was buried at St. Helen's on 14 October 1546, and John Mylton, priest, witnessed the will of Maud Bellingham, the wealthy widow of an abbey servant, in 1542.[40]

---

[33] By 1553 only eight former monks were still alive. B. Willis, *An History of the Mitred Parliamentary Abbies and Conventual Cathedral Churches* (London, 2 vols., 1718-19), I, 9-10.
[34] Baskerville, *English Monks,* pp. 256-7.
[35] Evysham and Cristall were both said to be aged 60 in 1547, and Asshenden was variously said to be aged 50 or 57 (BRO D/EP/7/33). John Clyffe had been admitted to the monastery by 1496 and was *instructor et praepositus* at the school by 1504. Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 289.
[36] This was twice as much as the two 'brotherhood' priests in the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, who were each to receive pensions of £6 6s 8d. BRO D/EP/7/33.
[37] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 290f. The Court of Augmentations did not pay him a pension in relation to the school, nor did it make any payments towards the school.
[38] BRO D/EP/7/38.
[39] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Robert Delwood, 28 June 1540).
[40] BRO D/A1/2 (will of Maud Bellingham made 8 April 1542).

The ex-abbot Thomas Pentecost, now Sir Thomas Rowland, only 5 miles away at Cumnor, kept a household which was a focus for previous colleagues and servants. The former sub-prior, Richard Pamphilion, acted as his chaplain; he maintained another ex-monk, Thomas Freeman, as 'my scholar of Oxford'. The ex-abbot lived as a gentleman of status, with possessions of quality and servants in livery; only his chaplain, the altar in his chamber and his library reveal his old life. He left a total of seventy-eight books to four of his former colleagues. He had maintained contacts with local laity; he left bequests to local men who had been or were still in his household, and one of these, Lionel Woodward, was a member of a leading Abingdon family and witness to his will.[41] Pentecost's establishment at Cumnor ceased to be of significance with his death in early 1540. But it is clear that, while the former monks continued to exercise spiritual responsibilities locally, they were also still involved in local politics and able to make their presence felt in their old sphere of influence. In 1547 four former Abingdon monks made depositions that the late John Audlett had forged a lease relating to Barton (by then held by Thomas Reade); three of them were locally based but the other was Gabriel Clement who had moved to London and was evidently in touch with his former colleagues.[42] A fifth deposition was made by Thomas Broughton, a local yeoman, and the former abbot's servant. The animosity between Audlett and the abbey had survived the dissolution and both their deaths.

Claire Cross found similar associations among the ex-monks of Roche abbey in Yorkshire, where she argues that they formed a 'virtual Cistercian community', 'ready and waiting to revive their former abbey' in 1555.[43] In St. Albans strong ties between ex-monks, town clergy and townspeople led to hopes for re-foundation,

[41] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Thomas Penticost of Cumnour, 21 April 1540).
[42] Clement was 'late of the parish of St. Botolf beside Billingsgate'. BRO D/EP/7/33.
[43] Cross, 'The last years of Roche abbey', pp. 234-7.

while in Canterbury former monks in the cathedral chapter conspired in defiance of Archbishop Cranmer.[44] There is no hint that the ex-monks of Abingdon were active in these ways, but it does seem likely that a loose association continued between them that maintained something of their community life, and recalled their common experience. Historians have expressed a wide range of opinions about the degree of hardship that was suffered by former monks and nuns. Baskerville claimed 'we should have been spared a great many of the tears which sentimentalists have shed over the fate of the former religious', and pointed out that pensions helped to prevent suffering.[45] Former members of religious houses probably could cope better with the change in their circumstances if they had new jobs and good pensions. For the monks of Abingdon the comfortable circumstances of their surrender, and in particular the grant of a residence and estate to the abbot, could be seen as a bribe to ensure the peaceful capitulation of the first large monastery to be dissolved. But this does not negate the possibility of psychological damage caused by the end of their monastic way of life. As well as the trauma caused by loss of home and community, and of spiritual treasures, they may have felt guilt and shame about their escape from the violence experienced at other houses. Some monks suffered serious persecution; when their fellow Benedictine houses of Reading, Glastonbury and Colchester resisted surrender, the abbots along with four monks were executed towards the end of 1539.[46] The experiences of the dissolution continued to shape the parochial work of former monks for many years.[47] The presence of the ex-religious in the Abingdon

---

[44] J.G. Clark, 'Reformation and reaction at St. Albans Abbey, 1530-58', *EHR,* 115 (2000), 302, 314-7; Baskerville, *English Monks,* p. 260.
[45] Ibid., p. 293.
[46] P. Cunich, 'The ex-religious in post-dissolution society: symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?', in J.G. Clark (ed.), *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 227-38. Altogether 85 religious houses were affected by persecution, and there were 120 violent deaths suffered by members of religious orders during the dissolution period.
[47] Haigh, *English Reformations,* p. 248.

area offered, for those who wanted it, a continuing link with traditional religious practice. At least four former monks, two of whom had been very senior in the abbey, remained in the town and presumably were welcome to do so. Both Cristall and Asshenden retained their roles as intercessors in chantries, now directly available to the town community at the 'still-beating heart of traditional religion'.[48]

If we are to conclude that, for a variety of reasons, the people of Abingdon might have regretted the loss of the abbey, it is not known either how much and for how long. Similar questions must be asked about how the community experienced the transformation of religious observance and parish life over the next twenty years, which saw a wholesale clearing out of religious and cultural tradition. Initially, after the suppression of religious houses was complete, the fears of religious traditionalists nationwide were allayed by a degree of reversal of reforming policies. The stop-start nature of the reformation must have caused general confusion and bewilderment to the devout, but innovations were patchily implemented. It was not until threats of fines in 1541 that most parishes purchased bibles in English for people to read, but this did not necessarily mean that bible reading was encouraged.[49] Conventional parish religion was more or less re-established until a second reformation started after Henry VIII's death in 1547. Edward VI's protestant ministers were committed to the reform of what was in their view erroneous religious practices, and also to accessing additional revenue; the Chantries Act of 1547 achieved both aims.

The second phase of dissolutions in 1548 swept away traditional structures and practices that were central to parochial life. Abingdon's fraternity was integrated into

---

[48] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, p. 241.
[49] Haigh, *English Reformations*, pp. 137ff. Baskerville, *English Monks*, p. 259.

the life of the town in a way that went far beyond its religious functions, as has already been discussed, and its dissolution affected the whole town as well as the devout.[50] The loss of 'potent symbols of urban pride' in the form of guild houses and chapels might have caused 'a feeling of despair' in many towns, but in Abingdon at any rate this was a short-term problem, and the cultural effects of the dissolution of the chantries should not be exaggerated.[51] The end of the fraternity did not affect the involvement of the town's elite in the life of the town. The management of the market house, almshouses and bridges continued. There was some sort of continuity of educational provision following on from the work of the former monk, John Clyffe. There is evidence that there were schoolmasters in Abingdon during this period, a provision that could only have been financed by leading townspeople.[52] Within a few years the fraternity was reinvented as Christ's Hospital, a supposedly lay organisation that was nevertheless fully integrated with the ceremonial life of St. Helen's Church.

The people of Abingdon generally took a practical view of the various threats and opportunities of the post-dissolution period, and such evidence as there is suggests an equally pragmatic reaction to religious and cultural changes. In 1549 there were riots against the new Prayer Book in various areas, and the west country rose up in rebellion, but Berkshire was peaceful.[53] Abingdon itself was under royal administration and this appears to have ensured conformity to the instructions of the regime of the day. As had happened after the monastic dissolution, abrupt changes of religious practice continued to be softened for the populace by a continuity of personnel. At least two of the ex-chantry priests retained a role in the religious life of

---

[50] See pp. 119ff.
[51] Cunich, 'The Dissolutions and their Aftermath', p. 232.
[52] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 290ff.
[53] See p. 122.

the community. William Drewett, the senior of the brotherhood priests, said to be forty years old in 1547 when he was awarded a pension of £6 6s 8d, stayed in Abingdon and continued to work as a curate in St. Helen's Church until his death in 1550. Many chantry priests worked on in the churches where they had been previously employed, and treated their pensions as stipends.[54] Drewett asked to be buried in St. Helen's churchyard, left a book of sermons to Ralph Hartley, the recently instituted vicar, who witnessed his will, and 2s to the old almshouse.[55] William Asshenden (the former monk who had been 'lady priest' at St. Helen's until 1547) died in Didcot in 1557, nineteen years after the dissolution. By then in his sixties, he left a small bequest to the rector of St. Helen's and St. Nicholas, Richard Corbett.[56]

A degree of continuity of personnel was probably important to the parishioners of St. Helen's and St. Nicholas, who experienced a quick turnover of vicars, rectors and curates in the 1540s and 1550s. Thomas Rich, the vicar of St. Helen's, died in 1540 after nineteen years in post, and was replaced by John Schether who stayed in post until his death in 1549. Rich was probably a traditionalist. Schether was presented by Thomas Wriothesley, and his churchmanship is not certain.[57] Ralph Hartley, appointed after Schether's death in 1549, had probably married because he was deprived in 1554, but was not necessarily a protestant.[58] If either Hartley or Corbett,

---

[54] He witnessed the will of one of the town's leading men as William Drewett, curate. BRO D/A1/5/72 (Thomas Erle, 26 May 1549); Haigh, *English Reformations*, p. 172.
[55] BRO D/A1/2 (not dated; Drewett was buried 31 July 1550).
[56] The bequest was a short gown and a worsted doublet. Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 76.
[57] Wriothesley had purchased the presentation before the dissolution. Preston viewed Wriothesley as a 'pronounced romanist' and assumed that Schether 'was of the same complexion'. However there is reason to believe that Wriothesley had private protestant tendencies, and it was not until 1543 that he allied himself with the catholic conformists who enforced conservative religious policies in the later years of Henry VIII's reign. Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 77; M.A.R. Graves, 'Wriothesley, Thomas, first earl of Southampton (1505–1550)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/30076, accessed 8 Sept 2010].
[58] The Clergy of the Church of England Database [http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/search/index.jsp. Record ID: 77779]. The royal injunctions

who was appointed rector in 1550, were protestant it might seem unlikely that they would have been mentioned in Drewett's and Asshenden's wills. Nothing is known about Thomas Phipps, named as curate when he witnessed a will in 1553, other than that he was married.[59] John Vauer, vicar of St. Helen's between 1556 and 1558, probably had traditional beliefs, as did his successor John Chamber. Chamber like many other clergy initially refused to subscribe to the Elizabethan oath of supremacy or to acknowledge the new Book of Common Prayer, and then reluctantly conformed.[60] The first known protestant minister in Abingdon was Edmund Wolf, appointed in 1562 by the reformist Bishop Jewel of Salisbury.

Within weeks after the restoration of the catholic religion with Mary's accession in July 1553 masses were celebrated, and altars and images were re-erected. In the words of a churchwarden of Stanford-in-the-Vale (10 miles west of Abingdon) 'all godly ceremonies and good uses' were re-established. [61] St. Helen's churchwardens' views are not known, but the extracts taken from their accounts show that the church repaired and renewed its fabric in a timely way.[62] The altar had already been put back by 1555, and in 1555 and 1556 sums of money were spent on the rood and on a holy water pot. When in 1559, after the accession of Elizabeth, protestant reforms were reinstated, St. Helen's again conformed to make alterations with relative speed. Some churches took much longer to conform: Thame in Oxfordshire (in the new diocese of

---

of March 1554 ordered the deprivation of all married priests; once their marriages were dissolved many were transferred to new benefices, but there are no further records about Hartley.

[59] He was left a sheet, and his wife was left a kercher and 6d. BRO D/A1/5/220 (Marian Spensre, 6 September 1553).

[60] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 78f., Haigh, *English Reformations,* pp. 243f.

[61] Haigh, *English Reformations*, pp. 206ff. Marian visitations indicate that the majority of churches were re-equipped by 1557.

[62] The first extract is dated 1555. 'Extracts from the churchwardens accompts of the parish of St. Helen's Abington', pp. 11-22. The accounts themselves are now lost.

Oxford) retained altars until 1564.[63] Bishop Jewel proved to be an energetic reformer, and made his first diocesan visitation in 1560.[64] The altar was removed and was replaced in 1560 by a communion table with a carpet at the cost of 6s and 2s 8d respectively. In 1561 the rood loft was taken down, and 3s 4d paid 'to the painter for writing the scripture where the rood loft stood and overthwart the same aisle'.

The community's response to change

It is difficult to assess how the townspeople coped with the bewildering pace of religious and cultural change. It is unfortunate that the surviving extracts from the St. Helen's churchwarden's account only date from 1555, so we are dependent on the evidence found in wills. Perhaps most Abingdon men and women followed the conservative tendencies of their religious leadership, but public conformity could often conceal individual spiritual inclinations and reactions during the period. An examination of 44 surviving wills of Abingdon men and women dated between the 1530s and the early 1560s and shown in Table 8 below only gives a very limited answer to questions about lay religious beliefs. On the assumption that writing or dictating a will could be a creative and personal devotional act, wills can be assessed as 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' depending on the religious formula used to bequeath the will-maker's soul. Caroline Litzenberger's study of will makers in Gloucestershire between 1540 and 1580 suggests a categorisation that puts will preambles into three groups: traditional, ambiguous and protestant; although she admits that 'humanity is much too complex for such simple categorisation'.[65] There are other difficulties: many historians have expressed doubt about whether wills are

---

[63] Haigh, *English Reformations*, pp. 245f.
[64] J. Craig, 'John Jewel, 1522-71', *ODNB,* Oxford University Press, 2004, online edn, Jan 2008, [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/14810, accessed 28 July 2010].
[65] Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity,* pp. 168-78.

reliable statements of individual faith.[66] Furthermore, while some wills do indeed express religious fervour or suggest religious affiliations, many wills are simple and conventional, and give no indication about the reality or otherwise of a testator's personal faith. Lastly, the wording of the will might reflect the influence of the scribe rather than the views of the testator. However where the scribes can be identified and their own likely religious views are known this is not necessarily a drawback.[67]

Scribe	**Description**	**Active**	**Wills**	**Type of will**		
				Traditional	Ambiguous	Protestant
Thomas Rich	Vicar	1521-40	4		4	
William Drewett	Chantry priest	until 1550	2	2		
	St. Helen's					
John Schether	Vicar	1540-9	9	5	4	
Richard Evysham	Ex-Prior	1538-?50s	1	1		
James Marbroke	Curate	?-1542	1		1	
	of St. Helen's					
John Milton	Ex-monk	1542	1		1	
William Powell	Lay clerk	1548-58	4	3	1	
	(Christ's Hospital)					
Ralph Hartley	Vicar	1550-4	1		1	
William Dally	Lay clerk	1552-92	6	2	4	
	(St. Helen's)					
John Vauer	Vicar	1556-8	4	2	2	
Thomas Heath	Lay clerk	1557-72	5	1	4	
	(St. Helen's)					
William Sympson	Town clerk	1556-8	1		1	
William Bowland	Notary	1550s	1			1
Francis Cressett	?	1556	1	1		
TOTAL			44	17	26	1

Table 8: Abingdon Wills 1538-60: scribes and categories

---

[66] C. Marsh, 'Attitudes to will making in early modern England', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 158-75.

[67] M. Spufford, 'Religious preambles and the scribes of villagers' wills in Cambridgeshire, 1570-1700', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part,* pp. 144-57.

It is generally agreed that will-making needs to be assessed in a local context, and the table above based on 44 surviving wills for Abingdon between the late 1530s and the early 1560s shows that ambiguous (or neutral) preambles outnumber traditional ones by 26 to 17. Even during periods when traditional preambles might be expected, up to 1547 and between 1553-8, they are comparatively unpopular. Four wills survive written by Thomas Rich and all are neutral, including the one he wrote for himself.[68] Several of the scribes wrote wills that fell into more than one category, so it is impossible to know to what degree, if any, they were imposing their own views on testators. The shift from traditional to neutral has been found elsewhere; this might suggest that in many localities devotion to the saints was decreasing, or alternatively that testators and scribes chose to be discreet about their beliefs.[69] For example the will of the former abbot, in which he called himself Thomas Pentecost not Thomas Rowland, is brief; 'my soul to God' is the only reference to his faith.[70] Some wills are ambiguous because of their use of a contradictory mixture of terms; in 1557 Thomas Echell's will (written by Thomas Heath, clerk of St. Helen's) stated 'surely my name is written in the book of life to be saved with the virgin Mary and all other the elect saints of God'.[71] In 1559 Hugh Carter's will (written by William Dally, also clerk of St. Helen's) bequeathed his soul to 'our Lady St. Mary and all the holy and blessed company of heaven', but uses a popular protestant term to describe his overseer, Humphrey Bostock, his 'well beloved in Christ'.[72] All in all, the analysis of Abingdon's wills is of interest but typically inadequate and confusing in terms of offering concrete evidence for lay religious beliefs.

---

[68] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Thomas Ryche, 21 February 1541).
[69] Haigh, *English Reformations* p. 200.
[70] TNA PROB 11/28 (will of Thomas Penticost of Cumnour, 21 April 1540).
[71] BRO D/A1/65/38 (will of Thomas Echell, cutler, 7 August 1557).
[72] BRO D/A1/51/125 (will of Hugh Carter, shoemaker, 11 July 1559).

The record of payments for month's and year's minds made to St. Helen's churchwardens only covers the years between 1556 and 1560 (when such payments ended), and gives a better indication of how many people subscribed to traditional religious practice in Abingdon.[73] This was a circumstance where the decision to hold commemorative services can be firmly identified with the wishes of the deceased or their family. These ceremonies were not particularly common in Abingdon in the 1550s, and were generally performed in memory of better-off townspeople who had died in maturity. Whether this was perhaps because of expense, or because traditional rites appealed only to older townspeople, or because they reserved as a mark of status in the community is not known. The payments relate to 27 adult men and women, about half of whom were from the town's elite families, including five members of the local gentry. Only a quarter of them had year's minds as well as month's minds. Wills survive for eight of these deceased parishioners; of these three reflect traditional ideas, and only two include specific bequests to pay for memorial services. Thomas Tesdale's will, made in 1556, points to a traditional faith with its reference to 'the holy company of heaven'; there were no instructions about memorials but his family spent 3s. on tapers for his month's mind.[74] The adult death rate in Abingdon during these years was high due to epidemic in 1557 and 1558; there were well over twenty burials of known adult members of the town's elite between 1556 and 1559 which were not commemorated by month's or year's minds. At a period when other traditional practices were restored at St. Helen's, the town's elite at any rate was divided in its response. Some families continued to value prayers for the dead, while other families did not take the opportunity to participate in formal commemorations.

---

[73] Payments are for tapers (costing from 1d. to 2d. each), torches and palls. 'Extracts from the churchwardens accompts of the parish of St. Helen's Abington' pp. 11-22.
[74] TNA PROB 11/40 (will of Thomas Tesdall of Fitzharrys near Abingdon, 29 January 1558).

Charitable bequests in wills also provide some indication of whether testators were moving away from requests for commemorative prayer and towards donations to local needs. The establishment of the poor man's box, a measure introduced at the beginning of Edward VI's reign, was intended to receive donations previously given for the upkeep of altars. There is evidence from eight wills dated between 1552 and 1565 of small donations towards a poor man's box both at St. Helen's Church and at the chapel in Shippon. There are not many examples of charitable bequests in surviving Abingdon wills from this period, but they display a slowly changing pattern of practice. The last known will to leave barley towards the upkeep of local churches was made in 1548. During the Marian period there were two bequests, one of sailcloth to make coats for poor children, and one of 4d to the old almshouse, made to the poor in return for prayer. In 1556 Thomas Reade's will followed the pattern of the will of his aunt Katherine Audlett in 1539, in leaving money for commemorative services as well as for local roads. In 1558 a Shippon husbandman left half a quarter of barley to the 'men's tin' (presumably the poor man's box) and a Shippon yeoman left half a quarter of malt to be prayed for at the chapel. The last known bequest to an altar was made in 1560, giving a further indication that traditional religious observances had come to an end in Abingdon.[75]

While there are some signs of attachment to the traditional religion during this period, there is no foreshadowing of the advent of the protestantism that would characterise Abingdon later in the sixteenth century. New religious ideas must have been known in Abingdon through connections with London and other important cities, but contacts

[75] BRO D/A1/3 Batell 58 (will of Thomas Lambold, 9 October 1557), BRO D/A1/12 Dandridge 53 (will of Elizabeth Braunche, 15 June 1556); BRO D/A1/35/110 (will of Robert Allmonte, 3 January 1557); TNA PROB 11/38 (will of Thomas Reade, 6 June 1556); BRO D/A1/66/192a (will of Nicholas Farmer, 20 August 1558); BRO D/A1/66/166 (will of Thomas North, 17 August 1558); BRO D/A1/51/173 (will of Robert Charlton, 1 June 1559).

with Oxford were equally important.[76] Peter Vermigli, the Italian regius professor of divinity who came to Oxford in 1547, influenced the protestant conversion of Oxford students, many of whom became preachers.[77] His follower, John Jewel, (later Bishop of Salisbury) preached regularly close to Abingdon at Sunningwell until he fled the Marian regime in 1554, and he must have become well-known locally. Sunningwell was a tiny and insignificant parish, and the juxtaposition of the former prior and the reformist bishop-to-be reflects the unusual cultural influence that Oxford could have on its hinterland. [78] Although evangelical ideas had filtered into everyday culture, in Abingdon, as in most places, committed protestants were probably still very much in the minority: 'they could come out of the closet after Mary's death, but it had not been very crowded in there'.[79] There is only one clearly protestant will made pre-1560 that survives for an Abingdon resident: Robert Forman, termed gentleman, whose will was written in May, 1551. Forman was a member of a family with business interests in London, and the notary who wrote his will is not known in Abingdon.[80] The endowment by Thomas Denton in 1555 of a sermon to be delivered annually on Easter Day can be viewed as a sign of serious interest in religion, but it seems unlikely that his original intention was to promote new religious ideas. Brod's view is that 'it was in the increasing numbers of sermons or 'lectures' financed by individuals or by the town government that the development of protestant enthusiasm can be gauged', but it was not until the 1570s when there were three new endowments for sermons that these lectures can be firmly connected with protestant preaching.[81] It

---

[76] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters', p. 66.
[77] Sixty of the Marian exiles were Oxford educated. Haigh, *English Reformations,* p. 188.
[78] Craig, 'John Jewel, 1522-71'. There is some doubt about the nature of Jewel's role at Sunningwell; if he was rector there from 1552 then Richard Evysham (ex-prior of Abingdon abbey) must have relinquished or been deprived of the appointment.
[79] Shagan, *Popular Politics,* p. 266; Haigh, *English Reformations*, pp. 200f.
[80] TNA PROB 11/34 (will of Robert Farman (Forman), 13 October 1551).
[81] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters', pp. 66-7, and pers.comm.

seems likely that Bishop Jewel's appointment to St. Helen's, Edmund Wolf, who was in post from 1562 until 1575, was the trigger for the growth of protestantism in the town.[82]

Conclusion

Although the people of Abingdon were at the receiving end of sequential religious and cultural change for more than two decades after 1538, little is known about how this change was experienced. There is limited evidence that hints at some retention of traditional links and practices when conditions allowed, and none at all of receptivity to new religious ideas. Nothing is known about any trouble-making or open dissension in connection with religious or cultural change. Acquiescence to official religious policies is not surprising in a community that was living directly under the eye of officials directly answerable to central government. It does seem feasible that for many people, as Shagan suggests, religious change was negotiated with an eye to political and economic considerations, with the result that the acceptance of new ideas was a practical 'series of decisions to accept or profit'.[83]

The pragmatism that characterised the way the townspeople of Abingdon coped with the various setbacks and opportunities of the post-dissolution years has been demonstrated in other contexts. Yet, however stoically the community acted, it is impossible that the cultural and religious upheaval caused no damage. There must have been despair and turmoil in some quarters caused by the destruction of traditional institutions, practices and beliefs. In cultural terms the effect of the

---

[82] If he was the same man as Edmund Wolf, vicar of St. Giles', Oxford, between 1545 and 1554, he may have been an old associate of Jewel's. The Clergy of the Church of England Database [http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/persons/index.jsp ID16213]. For further discussion about the growth of protestantism in Abingdon see pp. 294ff.

[83] Shagan, *Popular Politics,* p. 268.

abbey's demise was extremely negative. The town's identity had been defined by its administration for over five hundred years. Abingdon had been characterised by the cachet of its famous abbey; it was left as a secularised community, one of many market and thoroughfare towns. It has been said that the dissolutions left 'an empty space' in communities.[84] In Abingdon there was also a physical empty space: the decayed abbey precinct continued to be a constant reminder of the prestige the town had lost. As far as the dissolution of the fraternity is concerned, there were aspects of this loss that were also permanent. Although the fraternity was reborn as Christ's Hospital, its old role and links with St. Helen's Church were destroyed along with the structures of traditional catholic worship in the town.

We have to agree that in Abingdon, as was the case in so many other communities, pragmatic self-interest apparently won the day. But there is no proof that the town community wanted any aspect of religious change, even in terms of the dissolution of the abbey. The continuity provided by some of the key abbey personnel in relation to pastoral care may have prevented disruption, just as has already been noted it did in terms of the town's administration. It is clear that the process that transformed monastic town to borough involved pain and loss as well as opportunity and gain for the townspeople. The town's new institutions offered its leadership an enhanced profile, but where did the dissolution era leave the ordinary townsman? An urgent task for the leaders of Abingdon's new institutions was to reinvent an identity for the town, and to establish a new ethos. The 'empty space' would be filled with new beliefs and practices founded on civic values, economic development and protestant conformity.

---

[84] Cunich, 'The Dissolutions and their Aftermath', p. 235.

Chapter 8

Renewal and development: incorporated government and civic culture after 1556

It should now be clear why many historians have seen the reformation period as a critical time for urban organisational development. Despite the disruption and discontinuity in many aspects of urban life, ruling elites in many towns had acquired new local property and resources. In cases like Abingdon leading families had been the focus of economic and social continuity, and had made gains in their institutional control over their communities. Tittler has explored how earlier institutions of self-government in towns, like guilds and fraternities, could often be 'redefined and formalised as the central governing structures' of corporate boroughs.[1] Changes in administrative structure were inevitably associated with changes in social, cultural, ideological and religious behaviour. Withington proposed a major challenge to the established view that incorporation reinforced the oligarchic tendencies in urban government, and described incorporation as a dynamic event that 'endowed urban inhabitants with a remarkable range of powers and privileges'. Rather than a restrictive process, he saw incorporation as the gateway to a new identity as a 'small commonwealth'.[2]

By the 1550s central government policy had enabled Abingdon's elite to negotiate and achieve self-government. The sequential incorporations of Christ's Hospital and the borough ended the two decades of uncertainty that followed the dissolution of Abingdon abbey. The town's leadership had ambitions to do more than survive, and now had to lay down solid foundations for a future of settled prosperity. It has been

---

[1] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 150.
[2] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 211ff.; Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth* , pp. 8ff.

pointed out that their new responsibilities might weigh heavily on these new institutions, and Preston was correct that the government had nothing to lose by assenting to their incorporation.[3] But there were many different political, economic or social reasons for towns to seek the power and resources that incorporation could bring.[4] It is a strong argument that Abingdon's businessmen embraced the opportunity for self-government for the sake of their economic and social interests, and were willing to pay the price of finding the money for the fee farm, of accepting Sir John Mason's patronage and direction, and of shouldering new municipal burdens. It was their understanding of what the potential development of the town could offer them that was key to their ambitions for Abingdon's new administrative landscape.

While the hospital governors had the duty of care over the town's bridges and an almshouse, the new burgesses took over a wider range of administrative rights and responsibilities from the old manor courts for local justice and management of markets and fairs. We have already seen that between them the hospital and borough held about 75% of the private property in the town. The charter gave permission for a council house, but the market house was the only substantial public building granted to the town as part of its jurisdiction over the market.[5] The new burgesses had to take a broad view of their duties, and were to prove keen to conform to what might be expected of leading men in a new borough, ambitious both in terms of their own interests and for the town. They had the chance to improve its financial and political status, formerly one of about 100 towns (15% of English towns) that had been under

---

[3] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p. 28.
[4] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 180.
[5] Challenor, pp. 1-36.

ecclesiastical control before 1536, and subsequently one of 44 boroughs incorporated between 1540-60.[6]

This represented a series of challenges for the town's leadership, both in practical and ideological terms. Preston's 'dark years' had not, as he claimed, paralysed the town economically. It was in many ways the town's economy that had underpinned its survival, and it would need strong government to continue to do so. A further challenge lay in new responsibilities. The establishment of the new institutions of the borough and Christ's Hospital completed a process whereby the elite became themselves the local agents of government, although of course still subject to external controls, jurisdiction and interference. Through their new roles in government, Abingdon's leading men would have to organise and, to an extent, control their fellow townspeople. Abingdon had, however, experienced some difficult years in terms of political uncertainty, religious confusion and a loss of cultural identity. There had been a hiatus in the way in which Abingdon related to the wider world, and this needed to be redefined and renegotiated. Questions about the importance of the development of institutional power, social cohesion, and the town's status will be discussed in the second section of this chapter.

The first challenge for Abingdon's leaders, burgesses and governors of Christ's Hospital, was to become institutionally operational. They needed to establish independent, organised and authoritative government, and to improve public and private property while at the same time balancing the civic books. Tittler views the necessary sequence of events for a town that had previously lacked autonomous

---

[6] Tittler, *Architecture and Power,* p. 76

government as follows: acquisition, constitutional formalisation, possession and management, fortification and extension of authority by those in authority.[7] The immediate priority of Abingdon's elite had to be the financial and organisational management that would underpin their work and 'better' the town. If they wanted to instil business confidence in the town, they needed to improve their public and private properties and to curtail social problems caused by poverty. The objectives of leading elites have to be considered in the context of the problems that threatened most urban communities. Work done by urban historians in the 1960s and 1970s highlighted economic and social stress in the early modern town. At any time the 'chronic poor' represented 5% of the community, and at times of hardship 20% of an urban community may have needed assistance.[8] This problem could be exacerbated by population growth caused by the arrival of people looking for betterment through employment or subsistence through relief. Poverty was associated with fear of crime and unrest, while immigration challenged social and political institutions and economic capabilities. It was essential for them to maintain and improve income in the face of inflation to cover the necessary expenditure.

The development of administration and town finances

The charter granted to Abingdon by Philip and Mary had stated that:

> our beloved subjects, the inhabitants of the same town, have most humbly besought us that we would graciously and liberally show and extend to them our royal favour and munificence, and that for the bettering of the same town we would vouchsafe to incorporate the same town and the inhabitants thereof, and to make, ordain and create a body corporate of a Mayor, Bailiffs and Burgesses.

---

[7] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, p. 9.
[8] Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 71-2.

The charter rehearsed a familiar and platitudinous theme of what needed to be bettered: poor housing and buildings, and poor people. We have seen in a previous chapter that these were not extreme problems in Abingdon, but that they represented aspects of the town's economy and society that the elite would need to control and for which they needed funds. The importance of financial stabilisation should not be neglected in considering the establishment of local autonomy. Many of the town's leaders had invested money in the acquisition of private property and institutional power. Their personal expectations were dependent on the establishment of well-run, prestigious and profitable town government. They needed to attract and to retain freemen who were running prosperous businesses.

The new leaders of Abingdon put in place financial policies for the borough and the hospital that reflected their business acumen and experience. The records that survive show both institutions fulfilling all their obligations and building up financial reserves relatively quickly. Their charters obliged them to maintain almspeople at a total cost of over £40 p.a. Their properties included many tenements on low rent yields that required maintenance.[9] Urban property was not necessarily an appealing investment, due to the outlay regularly needed on renovation and upkeep. However, the town's leadership was granted a substantial controlling interest in property and in resources. Many towns gained a far smaller proportion of the possessions of religious institutions. The typical gross income and expenditure of towns of a similar size and importance to Abingdon in the 1570s was in a range of £50 to £90, and for larger provincial centres like Oxford and Leicester was between £80 and £160.[10] Institutional gross income and expenditure in Abingdon by the 1570s was never less

---

[9] See pp.166ff for borough and hospital holdings in the town.
[10] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 66, 103ff.

than £170 and was steadily increasing, with income and expenditure apparently keeping pace with each other. In Worcester civic revenues between 1540 and 1600 were only £80-90 but expenditure rose to about £120 p.a. in the 1590s, largely due to inflation. The problems caused by inflation to sixteenth century town administrators have long been recognised; many corporations had to face rising costs on fixed incomes.[11] However, Abingdon was perhaps fortunate that the borough was established towards the end of the period of most rapid inflation in the 1540s and 1550s, when it was beginning to slow down.[12] Furthermore we shall see that the town's leaders were able to take advantage of a steady rise in property values after the 1550s. Abingdon was in a position to achieve something similar to Leicester, where the borough took property over from the Duchy of Lancaster, and through systematic renovation and management set up 'something of a nest-egg for the future'.[13]

The borough chamberlain's accounts give only partial information about the corporation's income and expenditure. By 1560 it had been decided that the chamberlain should collect half of the total rental due to the corporation, yielding an income of between £50 to £60 p.a. depending on arrears. Another officer, possibly the mayor, received the remaining rents (from the most valuable properties) and other income from the market and the courts, as well as freemen's fines and entry fines. It is unfortunate that these accounts, used to pay the fee farm of just over £100, have not survived. The chamberlain's income was evidently not relied on to pay the fee farm, and was available from the outset for expenditure on the corporation's housing stock and also for public building projects. The chamberlain's other obligations were to pay

---

[11] A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester,* pp. 217ff.; MacCaffrey, *Exeter,1540-1640,* pp. 55-7; Hoskins, *Provincial England,* p. 99.
[12] For London Rappaport calculates that between 1560 and 1590 the decadal average was 6.6%, whereas between 1550 and 1559 inflation ran at 46%. Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* p. 131.
[13] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 120, 131.

the £15 12s due annually to the six almsmen of St. John's, as well as sundry fees and expenses. The town clerk, the legal counsellor and the sergeants cost up to £5 p.a., more if travel to London was needed.

In the first decade of the borough's management income was reduced by vacancies, by rent reductions due to the poor condition of property, and by rent arrears; in 1560 the chamberlain was short of £12, 25% of his projected income.[14] As early as 1559, the account had met the substantial cost of £6 16s 2d to rebuild a house in Ock Street.[15] A robust programme of improvements was put in hand and for the next ten years the chamberlain spent an average of just under £10 p.a. on property repairs and improvements. In the same period the chamberlain paid out £54 on public buildings. By the late 1560s annual rent arrears and reductions had been reduced to about £6, a trend that continued in the 1570s. The account remained in surplus, and the chamberlain was able to pay an annual sum to the mayor varying between a few shillings and as much as £20 in both 1580 and 1581, depending on what was spent on property repairs. There is no way of knowing whether the borough accounts remained in surplus overall, but it seems likely that the mayor's account should have easily been able to meet the fee farm payment through the receipt of the other half of the rental income plus the income from other sources listed above. There is only one mention of the fee farm in the surviving chamberlain's accounts, when £3 was given to the bailiffs at the mayor's request to pay the farm in 1576.[16] A note about debts to the chamber at the end of the first book of chamberlain's accounts suggests that a surplus of over £90 had been amassed by 1582, with large sums of money out on loan to, among others, Mr. Hallywell the town clerk, Mr. Blacknall, and the churchwardens

[14] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, f.36.
[15] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, f.23d.
[16] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, f.156.

of St. Helen's. This suggests that Abingdon's administration was less vulnerable than that of other towns like Oxford and Gloucester, where finances tended to swing from surplus to deficit.[17]

Property management was a challenge for institutions: on the one hand customary rents were not subject to increase, and receipt of entry fines, which could be raised, was unpredictable, on the other the cost of repairing the average tenement in Abingdon could be at least ten times the annual rental. The officers of the new borough introduced short-term leases in order to increase income and offset the expense of ongoing property maintenance. This proved to be an important strategy, and many better-off customary tenants were granted leases in the sixteenth century. The Mayor's Book gives a brief summary of over 130 leases granted between 1561 and 1600. The book was probably first written up *c.*1572, and was then updated at regular intervals, with a gap in the 1580s, so it is likely that some leases were unrecorded. One of the earlier leases illustrates the advantages of leasehold to both landlord and tenant. 'Reparations' to a house rented 'at will' by 'mother' Brian (the widow of a wheeler) in the Stert in 1560-1 at 5s p.a. had cost the corporation over £3, the equivalent of thirteen years' rent. In 1568 Elizabeth Brian took a full repairing lease on the property for 21 years at 6s 8d p.a.[18] It is not known whether she paid an entry fine, but regardless of this both parties stood to gain from the transaction. A lease represented greater security for the tenant, but more importantly had a value that could be transferred or borrowed against. The landlord could become free of repair obligations, and could negotiate rent increases at regular intervals. The mayor, bailiffs

---

[17] This is discussed at length in Tittler, *Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 106ff. Oxford City Council had to borrow money between *c.*1584-1617 to balance their budget. See also the discussion of Gloucester's insolvency in P. Clark,''The Ramoth-Gilead of the Good': Gloucester 1540-1640', in J. Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town, a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1998), p. 258.
[18] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts f.29 and 38d.; AAAHS, Mayor's Book, p. 21.

and burgesses invariably retained the right to inspect for state of repair and to veto tenancy transfers. In Elizabeth Brian's case the town had spent money repairing her house, but other tenants covenanted to do their own repairs, like John Wise in 1563 who was granted a lease of two tenements in Broad Street and promised to rebuild one of them within five years.[19]

Christ's Hospital's basic income, all from rents, as granted in its charter was just over £65. The governors were responsible for the New Almshouse and its thirteen inmates, four bridges and a causeway, and their tenements. On the face of it they might have had an uphill struggle to keep solvent. An urgent obligation was to repay the £33 that had been invested by Abingdon businessmen to pay for the expenses of the letters patent for Christ's Hospital in 1553-4. In the event the accounts show that £19 of this had been repaid by 1557. At no stage in the accounts is there any indication of shortage of funds. The rules rehearsed at the beginning of the first surviving minute book, starting in 1577, had determined that governors could spend surplus income on bridges, the poor and needy and to 'thesustentionacon' of a grammar school.[20] The hospital accounts show regular expenditure on repairs, both to houses and bridges. The bridges were crucial to Abingdon's trade, and occasionally bridge repairs took a significant portion of hospital income. The bridges cost £7 p.a. on average between 1553 and 1571; over £13 in 1562, over £17 in 1565 and in 1566 and £28 in 1576.

Christ's Hospital steadily increased payments to almspeople, from £25 2s 8d in 1553 to £33 10s in 1578, 'in consideration that all thing is risen to exact price'. Despite

---

[19] AAAHS, Mayor's Book, p. 20.
[20] CHA, Minutes, f.5v.

these calls on income, throughout the 1560s the governors were able to save about £20 p.a. In the early 1570s the governors had money in their treasury to spend £30 on the purchase of a house in Little Bury Street that had previously belonged to the fraternity, and contributed to the erection of a new house in the Bury for Richard Mayott.[21] In 1579 the governors decided to start to pay 6d per week to 13 poor people (£16 18s p.a.), and at the same time could afford to loan £40 to three master weavers in the town 'to set poor a work by spinning'. In recognition of their obligations to the poor they resolved to limit the cost of their yearly dinner to 22s.[22]

By 1585 the governors had been able to accumulate savings that enabled them to make loans totalling £95 to townsmen.[23] The hospital acted as a lending bank for Abingdon men, in line with the widespread use of loans and credit revealed in wills and inventories that was typical of the period. In 1589 the governors had £100 available to purchase Antony Tesdale's house in East St. Helen's Street: £40 in ready money, and £60 in bonds. The detailed rental set out in their accounts book sometime in the 1570s shows that the governors had increased their annual income by about 10% to over £72 so were keeping pace with inflation. This increased revenue largely came from rent increases negotiated with three tenants after property repairs, from purchasing a tenement and leasing it out, and from building a house on a vacant plot in the Bury.[24] The governors like the mayor and burgesses faced the considerable problem of meeting property repairs and improvements on properties held by customary tenants without the opportunity of rental increases. Even simple house

---

[21] CHA, Accounts, 1571 and 1572. The house in Little Bury St. is almost certainly the property that had been purchased by Thomas Meadow (a former governor who died in 1557) via intermediaries, William Sall and William Bridges, in 1549. CPR, Edward VI, III (1549-51), 102. These two investments represented only a 2.5% return in terms of increased rental income.
[22] CHA, Minutes, f.18v – 19.
[23] CHA, Minutes, f.22.
[24] CHA, Accounts, pp. 1-12.

repairs could be a considerable expense: typically re-roofing cost about £2, often the equivalent of several years' rent.[25]

One way to cover the lack of return on much of their property was for the governors to adopt the corporation's strategy, and encourage their better-off tenants to take on full repairing leases. In 1574 they took the option to leave necessary repairs to their tenant, paying 40s to John Bray, a cordwainer in the Bury, 'for taking his house by lease with charge of repairs'.[26] In 1598 John Sarney, a mason, took a lease at 5s p.a. on condition that he built a new house with a stone chimney within 3 years.[27] Entry fines had always been a significant addition to income when properties changed hands, and this continued to be so where leases were granted in the place of customary tenancies. The fine paid for a lease of a tenement and land at Culham in 1567 was £5, the equivalent of 5 years' rent. The dealings between the governors and their tenant of the farm that comprised Caldecott and St. Helen's Mills illustrate how the hospital was able to keep up with inflation by increasing rents on leasehold properties. The customary rent for the farm in 1547-8 was £14 13s 4d, and the farm continued to yield the same sum until the 1570s. In March 1578 Richard Smythe, gentleman, was granted a 21 year lease at a rent of £24, an increase of over 60%. This lease was renewed after sixteen years in 1594, when he took on a further 21 year lease of the farm for a consideration of £20.[28] The rent on a much smaller property, a tenement next to the Lamb Inn in Ock Street, increased by 25% to 10s p.a. when Richard Ely (tenant of the Lamb) took on a 21 year lease in 1595, paying a fine of £3

---

[25] ABA, 43d., f.62.
[26] CHA, Accounts 1553-1606.
[27] CHA, Minutes, f.53.
[28] CHA, Minutes, f.28.

6s 8d.[29] Initially only members of the town's elite were able or willing to change their tenancies to leaseholds, but by 1595 the governors were granting leases to ordinary townsmen, such as Thomas Vickery who paid an entry fine of 20s for a 26 year lease of a tenement in Ock Street, where the annual rent increased from 10s to 13s 4d.[30]

Both the borough and the hospital were evidently able to maintain and improve institutional property and at the same time preserve their income. A second important consideration was the need to develop strategies to help the poor. The problems caused by poverty could be overwhelming for town governments, although, as we have seen, Abingdon was able to retain some of its pre-reformation poor relief practices and so escaped the disruption of traditional charitable systems experienced elsewhere as a result of the reformation. Nationally inflation and population growth exacerbated urban poverty after the 1550s, whether or not a town's economy was in good heart, and after 1580 almost every town complained of overcrowding.[31] It was essential to urban administrators that their charitable activities should defuse tensions between the haves and the have-nots. Efforts to find employment for the able poor almost certainly continued intermittently in Abingdon as they did in every town at this period. There is no evidence of any action from the borough, but Christ's Hospital's loan to three weavers in 1579 to create work for spinners has already been mentioned. Abingdon was well provided with almshouse accommodation, but the hospital's decision to start formal outdoor relief in the 1570s suggests that poverty was increasing in the town, probably as a result of population pressure.[32] Widows and

---

[29] CHA, Minutes, f.30.
[30] CHA, Minutes, f.29v.
[31] See pp. 150f. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England,* pp. 13, 67ff.
[32] See pp. 223-4 and Appendix 1.

single women were the main focus of the new grant, and eleven out of thirteen recipients of 6d per week in December 1579 were women.[33] Surviving records only hint at how problems caused by poverty and disease were dealt with in the town, and it is difficult to know how far either the borough or the hospital developed strategic policies, or whether they responded to problems on an ad hoc basis. The town's leaders would have known about the sort of steps taken in larger towns like Norwich, such as organised medical intervention and the use of lazar and pest houses.[34] The hospital was obliged to sustain the poor and needy, and their expenditure record shows that the governors took this duty seriously. The hospital had successive tenants in East St. Helen's Street who were surgeons. It is not clear whether this was a deliberate policy to improve medical care in the town, but in 1579 the governors paid £2 to 'the surgeon' for the long-term treatment of two sick townspeople, and by 1595 a surgeon received a small annual payment to treat the poor.[35] The borough is only known to have acted in cases of contagion: it set up a pest house on the edge of the town near the Ock Bridge, and occasionally paid for the sick to be cared for in their own homes, or for the transport of lepers to lazar houses.[36]

There is no evidence that compulsory poor rates were levied in sixteenth century Abingdon. However, the poorer tenants of the new borough benefited from the operation of a social welfare policy to subsidise rents. A detailed examination of rent arrears for borough properties recorded in the chamberlain's accounts between 1557 and 1581 shows that arrears were tolerated in some cases, and that deserving tenants

---

[33] CHA, minutes, f.19. At least five of the recipients of outdoor relief were almshouse residents by the time they died.
[34] M. Pelling, 'Healing the sick poor: social policy and disability in Norwich 1550-1640', *Medical History,* 29 (1985), 115-37.
[35] CHA, Accounts, 1579; Cox, *Peace and War,* p. 35.
[36] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, f.169, f.170 (1579); Vol.2, f.85 (1583)

were allowed to stay on in their properties. This policy is largely hidden but is confirmed both by an analysis of arrears and by annotations to the rent arrears list for 1576 and 1577 regarding the poverty of some tenants. In both years Helen Prince paid only half the rent due, 4s instead of 8s, and it is noted that she was very poor and 'can have no work'. She never paid her rent in full again, and was buried in 1583. Another tenant, John Widdows, also described as 'very poor', failed to pay his rent in full for eleven years out of thirteen between 1565 and 1578. Ellen Edwards, a widow in Littlebury Lane who had never previously failed to pay her rent, had sub-tenants who 'would pay no rent, and she herself is very poor'. She was excused her rent in 1576 and died in 1577. However of the ten tenants in arrears in 1576 nine were poor and most of these were long-term defaulters.[37] It seems likely that the corporation accepted long-term responsibility for tenants when they fell on hard times, and took the view that there was no advantage to the community in making them homeless. In less deserving cases the chamberlain certainly made an effort to pursue defaulting tenants, and occasionally took a distress in place of the rent, for example in 1562 a table belonging to William White was taken in lieu of a quarter's rent of 3s 4d.[38]

Christ's Hospital governors adopted a similar attitude, when Thomas Williams owed them 40s (3 years' rent) in 1573. The cost of suit against him was 3s 10d, and he paid the arrears in 1574.[39] The governors were, like the borough, tolerant towards their poor tenants, agreeing before the 1570s that if they were owed rents in circumstances 'of such poverty that nothing is to be had' then the debt should be discharged.[40] In reality they went further than this and, like the corporation, allowed their defaulting

---

[37] ABA, f.159d., f.163.
[38] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, f.48.
[39] CHA Accounts, 1573 and 1574.
[40] CHA, Minutes f.15.

tenants to remain in their houses. In the 1570s William Dally, clerk of St. Helen's, was regularly in arrears, and was at least once excused his rent of 8s 'allowed him for his poverty'.[41]

The result was that the town's leaders operated a system of social care that extended housing provision for the town's poor far beyond the almshouses. John Hill, glover, was a corporation tenant who was in frequent rent arrears throughout the 1560s and 1570s; in 1579 he became one of the thirteen supported by the hospital at 6d per week. Another welfare strategy employed by both institutions towards the end of the century was to safeguard the housing arrangements of widows and single women by including them as sub-tenants in new leases. In 1594 Christ's Hospital granted a new lease in Bore Street with a covenant that the tenant 'shall permit Jane Williams to enjoy that rooms she now hath during her widows estate'.[42] In 1593 the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses granted a lease in Ock Street to William Collins on condition that he allow Edie Stiles and her two daughters to remain in part of the tenement, making a contribution to the rent.[43] The 1597 lease to Richard Packer stipulated that he discharge the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses from any future financial or housing responsibility for Alice Burnam, widow, his mother-in-law.[44]

The development of civic culture

Historians remain well aware of the social and economic stresses that could undermine sixteenth century town government. More recently they have also focussed on the religious, cultural and political challenges faced by many urban

---

[41] CHA, Accounts, 1578.
[42] CHA, Minutes, f.29.
[43] AAAHS, Mayor's Book, p. 33. In the event Edie Stiles moved to the new almshouse where she died in 1597.
[44] Ibid., p. 43.

communities. James viewed the development of post-reformation civic culture as a deliberate policy adopted by the elite to replace religious focus with political and secular focus, through an emphasis on civic rather than religious heritage.[45] Whether or not the loss of pre-reformation faith-based ritual and communal values was mitigated by new civic practices, this may have been a secondary or even an incidental consideration. To Tittler the prime purpose for an urban elite in fostering civic culture was to 'retain reasonably orderly social relations and due political process'.[46]

While it is easy to agree that Abingdon's elite needed an ideological structure to support town government it is not so straightforward to grasp the different aspects that historians have viewed as contributing to civic culture, ranging from the need for order, hierarchy and discipline to the representation of civic ethos through public works and ceremonies. Abingdon, it has been argued, had faced an extremely sharp break from its past, and the elite faced something of a void in terms of continuity of cultural practice. The elite had to invent a secular civic culture for the town with only a limited precedent to draw on. They had to encourage community participation in government and find ways that were sometimes restrictive and protectionist to assimilate every degree of townspeople in civic life. At the same time the leading group needed to reinforce their status at the top of the town hierarchy and work together to model cohesion to the whole community. Their status would in turn strengthen the town's relationships with the wider world. Another essential contribution to the status of the town was the restoration of its prestige in visual and tangible terms through buildings and ceremonies. How did the elite handle the

---

[45] James, 'Ritual, drama and social body in the late medieval English town', pp. 3-29.
[46] Tittler, R., 'Society and Social relations' in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn., 2009), p. 376.

tension between these different elements and how did they draw them together to establish their rule in the borough?

First and foremost the town's leaders needed to organise their civic life. To an extent their hopes for a new civic identity must have been coloured by the town's past reputation, and a desire to regain and re-establish status that had been lost along with the abbey. Their understanding of leadership was already deeply hierarchical, and formalised oligarchic leadership was a simple step for an established elite. Administrative practice was undoubtedly copied from other longer-established borough towns, and recognised the need for the advice of professional administrators and legal advisers. Under the charter the mayor was made coroner, clerk of the market and JP. He was also to hold the court leet twice yearly. Although the town was granted a weekly court of record in the original charter in 1556, this passed from the jurisdiction of the bailiffs to the mayor in 1565 without a formal appointment of recorder and it was not until a third charter was granted in 1609 that a recorder was appointed. The importance to the new town leadership of professional advice from experienced men should not be under-estimated. From the outset the borough retained a legal adviser who acted in the role of a recorder, particularly at the Quarter Sessions hearings. Thomas Denton was retained until his death in 1558, and subsequently John Yate, a barrister of the Middle Temple and member of a local gentry family, acted as legal adviser to both borough and hospital until the late 1560s. The next permanent appointment was Thomas Stampe, barrister of Lincoln's Inn, in the 1570s, who was also elected a governor of Christ's Hospital in 1574. The institutions employed their own clerks: the first town clerk, William Simpson, died in 1557 and his successors, John Pudsey and John Hallywell, were local gentlemen who

both served long terms in office. The hospital's first clerk was William Powell, described in the St. Helen's burial register in 1559 as 'a scrivener sometime register in Devonshire'.[47]

The office-holders of Abingdon's newly incorporated bodies were faced with a dramatically altered administrative framework, but their behaviour must have been informed to some extent by past experience, past events, and past attitudes in their pre-reformation community.[48] The fraternity had always been oligarchic, rather than inclusive, but it represented a quasi-civic past to the collective memory of all townspeople. A common sense of heritage fostered respect for community, and the operation of collective memory was often linked with religious practice.[49] In the case of Abingdon the townspeople were able to maintain a link with the past through the renewal of the Fraternity of the Holy Cross as Christ's Hospital, retaining the almshouses, bridges and market cross, and maintaining a strong connection with the life of the town church, St. Helen's. They shared a sense of urban consciousness that had developed over the years with the establishment by the town's laity of an identity for the town that was independent of the abbey. Moreover, while there may have been ambivalence about some of the changes in their town, the borough status offered a new and somewhat more inclusive model of social and political structure. The town's elite had various opportunities to foster harmony and good relations based on ideas of common rights, responsibilities, aspirations and values, but perhaps the most important aspect of their relationship with the townspeople was a shared history of varying degrees of subordination to the abbey.

---

[47] Sixteenth century town clerks and legal advisers are discussed more fully in Baker, *Historic Abingdon,* pp. 3-10 and Liversidge and Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays,* p. 62.
[48] Tittler *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 161.
[49] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 17.

Inevitably the formalisation of town government created 'a considerable political, not to say social and economic, distance ... between the governors and the governed'.[50] However, any consciousness of a new subordination that may have been experienced by ordinary townspeople might be mitigated by ideas of mutuality, such as commonly felt aspirations for the success of the new borough.[51] Although the post-reformation community in Abingdon was by no means democratic, there were participatory elements such as election meetings and perambulations.[52] The 1556 charter allowed for 'men of the inferior sort', known in Abingdon as elsewhere as potwallopers (men who had a hearth and paid scot and lot), to have a say in both the election of the mayor and of the bailiffs. They could nominate two principal burgesses from whom the other principal burgesses chose the mayor, and in the case of bailiffs they were allowed to ratify the election of one (the mayor's choice) and choose the other from the secondary burgesses. This only gave them a limited choice, since they had no control over the choice of the burgesses themselves, but it did offer a forum for debate and a safety valve for public opinion which was probably more welcome to the potwallopers than to the elite.[53] Tittler suggests that contemporaries readily accepted oligarchic practices as long as there was some 'element of participation, consent and delegation'.[54]

The mayor and burgesses did not need to innovate in order to establish a framework of government, but could depend on the example of cities and older boroughs as 'repositories of civic, civil and commercial values', acting as 'templates for the civic

---

[50] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 19.
[51] Griffiths, Fox and Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England,* p. 2.
[52] See p. 131.
[53] *VCH,* Berks, IV, 430-51.
[54] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 140.

development' of smaller urban centres.[55] The charter itself set out a template for the town's administration that embraced ideals of civic behaviour in hierarchical terms. The burgesses were to be 'twelve of the better and more honest and discreetest men' and they 'according to their sound discretions' were to select sixteen other men of similar character. They were to work together to establish 'good, wholesome, honest and reasonable' rule over the 'beloved subjects' of the crown.[56] Sir John Mason viewed the foundation of Christ's Hospital in a similarly hierarchical way, in a line of patronage that connected God, the crown, Mason himself, the hospital and the poor. In 1553 12s was disbursed at the death of Edward VI by Mason's command 'to celebrate and give thanks to God for his great liberality and goodness showed to them and all their posterity the poor within that hospital for ever'.[57] Those men who were set above their peers needed to safeguard the dignity of their office, in order to gain the respect of the townspeople and enhance the reputation of the town. The requirement to highlight the honour and authority of corporate office was quickly appreciated: in 1559 all burgesses were required to wear their gowns in council.[58] Fines were imposed on those who spoke unseemly words ('all matters being put in question ... shall be reasoned and answered reasonably and charitably') or revealed what had been said at council meetings.[59] Such rules became a norm in Elizabethan towns.[60] The importance of the concept of civic reputation to the individual office-holder can be seen in an undignified protest at the election of John Wise, an Abingdon husbandman, as a new governor of Christ's Hospital in the 1580s. His fellow governor, Antony Bostock, member of one of Abingdon's leading families, clearly

---

[55] Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth,* p. 20.
[56] Challenor, p. 5.
[57] CHA, Accounts 1553-1606, p. 15.
[58] Challenor, p. 124.
[59] Ibid., 1561 and 1562, pp. 124-5.
[60] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 306ff.

felt that this election demeaned the other governors. He claimed that they chose Wise for no better reason than 'for that he should help them with his cart', and is said to have pushed Wise out of the seat appointed for him in St. Helen's church.[61]

The appointments to public office conferred significant power and responsibility on 'beloved' and 'good and honest' men.[62] The first such men were named in the charter and probably chosen by Sir John Mason. What sort of men were they and what sort of continuity of policy and practice did they provide for the town?[63] In many ways a degree of continuity was assured in that subsequently principal burgesses were co-opted not elected.[64] Five of the twelve principal burgesses appointed in 1556 were no longer in office by 1560 – four had died and one had moved to Oxford where he married a wealthy widow and later served as mayor. There was, however, a core of men who were in office in Abingdon for many years. Six of the twelve founder burgesses continued in office until the late 1570s, and five of these six served equally lengthy terms as governors of Christ's Hospital. Four men, Richard Mayott, Humphrey Bostock, James Fisher and Thomas Orpwood, all members of established Abingdon leading families, remained at the core of the town's administration until the 1580s. All four were founder governors of Christ's Hospital and founder burgesses; three served as master of the hospital and all four served as mayor. William Braunche was the son of Richard, a former master of the fraternity, and Humphrey Bostock's nephew, and his involvement in town government lasted even longer. He took office on both bodies during the 1550s and was master of the hospital several times, mayor

---

[61] CHA, Minutes, f.23.
[62] Challenor, pp. 1ff.
[63] See Appendix 3.
[64] Tittler, 'The emergence of urban policy 1536-58', p. 89.

four times, and the town's MP in 1593.[65] Braunche along with two other men, Thomas Smythe and Richard Quelche, retained office in both institutions from the late 1550s until the 1590s. There were in all eight men (including John Chantrell, who held office and took an administrative role as clerk in both institutions) who served both institutions from the 1550s into the 1570s and 1580s. These men worked together in apparent unanimity to control institutional policy for the first 25 years of hospital and borough government. There were only positions for twelve principal burgesses and ten governors of Christ's Hospital, and for most of those years the eight men monopolised sixteen of the available twenty-two offices.

The consequence was a concentration of civic power and initiative in the hands of a few families who had pushed for the incorporations, which inevitably limited the opportunity for others to advance in town politics. The oligarchic nature of the two institutions meant that the only men who reached high office at a relatively young age tended to be connected with the core leading families, because their elders wanted to ensure that they were on the civic ladder. Lionel Bostock was mayor at thirty-seven years old, and John Fisher, Thomas Mayott and Paul Orpwood were all mayors in their early forties. Patronage extended to family connections. Thomas Jennens was probably also in his forties when he became a governor of Christ's Hospital in the 1570s: his father had been a founder principal burgess who had died in 1560. Thomas' aunts had married leading men, William Braunche and Thomas Smythe, and he himself married into the Mayott family. He was an able administrator who served as borough chamberlain for eight years, but in common with many others his civic career was cut short by premature death. William Braunche's son Thomas was a high

---

[65] Hasler (ed.), *The Commons, 1558-1603,* I, 480.

burgess by the age of forty-two. Braunche's son-in-law Robert Payne, a draper who had moved to Abingdon on his marriage, was quickly promoted into office.

For those outside this inner circle there were fewer opportunities for civic office, and not every wealthy or successful businessman became involved in town government. Most of the successors to Abingdon's first burgesses and governors had a long wait. Men like John and Nicholas Bolt, brothers and drapers, both died in their fifties as secondary burgesses in the 1590s. Despite their connection with the Bostock family they had perhaps progressed as far up the administrative ladder as they could. William Welling, a saddler, must have been well into his fifties when he became a governor of Christ's Hospital in 1587, and although he was a principal burgess by 1599, never became mayor. He had made an advantageous marriage to the heiress of Humphrey Jackson, who had been mayor of Reading in 1568. Jackson had left his daughter Joan property in Reading, and settled £160 on his grandsons. Jackson ended his life living with his daughter and son-in-law in Abingdon, and pointedly left his best gown, which was probably his aldermanic gown, to his son-in-law.[66] It seems likely that his father-in-law's money and status made up for Welling's less prestigious occupational status. He probably had to wait for a vacancy to open up in the civic ranks, as did Henry Ayers, another member of a well-established but less important Abingdon family, who was aged between fifty and sixty when he died in 1587 one day after his election as mayor. John Goodwin was a prosperous ironmonger, and did not progress beyond being a secondary burgess, although he must have been in his fifties when he died. His father had purchased seven different houses and plots of land in the town before his death in 1555, and John's will made in 1585 shows that he was

[66] TNA PROB/11/63 (will of Humphrey Jackson, 2 May 1581).

himself very well-to-do.[67] Lionel Welford, woollen draper, was another prosperous man who was an obvious candidate for high office but was only a secondary burgess when he died. Incomers offered new blood and ideas if they were sufficiently able and prosperous to be elected to office. As Marcombe observed in Retford, there was room for a newcomer of the right sort.[68] One of the most successful was Francis Little who had family connections in the town, where he had a long and largely successful career in the corporation and Christ's Hospital, and was the town's MP in the 1597 parliament.[69] Nevertheless, with sixteen secondary burgess-ships on offer, there were opportunities for men to advance in civic service, even if they might not aspire to nor achieve principal burgess-ship.

Although there was only a limited participatory element for ordinary townspeople in town government, the elite needed to foster social, economic and political structures within which all the townspeople could be assimilated.[70] Progress from servant to apprentice to journeyman to master was a familiar concept, as was marriage and household establishment, whereas progress in formal civic participation was novel, but offered only subordinate opportunities for lesser individuals, such as the post of sergeant. However with incorporation came the option for townspeople to take up their freedom, and this was a way to draw a new economic and social group into civic life. In Abingdon we know little about freemen's privileges other than that they offered trading benefits.[71] Although the record of freemen is only fragmentary, listing

---

[67] BRO D/A/4/Austen (will of Robert Godwyn, 20 July 1555); TNA PROB 11/68 (will of John Goodwin 4 November 1585).
[68] Marcombe, *English Small Town Life: Retford 1520-1642,* p. 57.
[69] Hasler (ed.), *The Commons, 1558-1603*, II, 480.
[70] Tittler, 'Society and Social Relations in British Provincial Towns', pp. 363ff.
[71] Townsend, *A History of Abingdon,* p. 114.

the names of payments received from 52 men between 1557-9, many more men must have been admitted and paid their fines in 1556.[72]

There were different levels of involvement through which a sense of civic identity could develop.[73] There are no details of formal organisation into trade or craft companies earlier than a town council order in 1609 authorising a Company of Shoemakers or Cordwainers with Master and Wardens, but it is known that other crafts were already organised in this way.[74] Men who would never be burgesses might be proud to be freemen or potwallopers or members of a company. Parishioners, and members of lesser bodies, including social groups of friends, family, or neighbours, shared a sense of community, or a 'sense of place'.[75] These sorts of associations can usually only be guessed at, other than from the evidence of wills. Hugh Carter, shoemaker, had no known connections with town administration, but he called on his friend and 'well beloved in Christ', Humphrey Bostock (one of Abingdon's most important civic leaders) to be executor of his will.[76] Carter was a respectable townsman, solidly 'middling sort', with a baker brother who improved his status by marrying the inn-keeper widow of a burgess. Both men were probably freemen of the new borough. Desire to participate in community life can be seen in humbler people, like the journeyman Richard Goswell, who came from Newbury, and at the time of his death was lodging with an Abingdon smith, working for an Abingdon pewterer. He clearly retained strong associations with Newbury, but he made only one bequest to the poor, and that was to the poor of Abingdon.[77] In this

---

[72] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, ff.3, 7, 14.
[73] Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth,* pp. 98-9.
[74] Challenor, p. 136, Appendix XV.
[75] Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth,* pp. 87-99.
[76] BRO D/A1/51/125 (will of Hugh Carter, 11 July 1559).
[77] BRO D/A1/71/62 (will of Richard Goswell, 11 October 1582).

sense bequests to the community are just as much a sign of participation as they are of religious observance or desire to be remembered. In a densely settled town of about 2000 people, civic and community identity were inextricably connected. The communal behaviour and collective responsibility of an urban society that was centred on church and market place enhanced social cohesion.

Another way in which the town leadership could foster community cohesion was through protectionist policies. The burgesses needed to keep the monopoly of trade within the borough and protect the town's economic prosperity from 'foreigners' and for the benefit of freemen. 'Foreigners' had to pay heavier tolls and had more limited trading opportunities. One of the first orders made by the mayor and burgesses in 1556 was that no innholder or other inhabitant should lodge a guest, artificer or stranger for more than three days or nights without giving notice to the mayor.[78] Such controls were an inevitable accompaniment to the prioritisation given to economic security by the town's leaders. Other early orders 'concerning the good rule of the ... borough' imposed a series of protectionist social controls on Abingdon society. It was typical of many urban communities that restrictive by-laws replaced previously unwritten rules that had governed social relations. In Liverpool the town council had gone as far as instituting a by-law in 1541 that 'all and every person shall make and do neighbourhood'.[79] Measures introduced in Abingdon in 1556 were less idealistic and more practical, largely concerning safety, introducing a curfew and a rule that 'every inhabitant shall have in readiness a good and sufficient club for the

[78] Challenor, p. 119.
[79] Cited by Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 33.

conservation of the ... peace'.[80] The burgesses expected to control and restrict the townspeople in order to safeguard their well being.

We have discussed various ways in which Abingdon's leaders met the challenge to establish a civic framework that would maintain their own authority and also include, protect, organise, involve and inspire the townspeople. We now have to turn to the challenge that they faced in restoring the town's reputation and status in the eyes of the outside world. The importance of working relationships and kinship ties developed between many of the elite families in the pre-dissolution period has already been mentioned. Collaboration between members of the elite had been vital for laying the foundations for town government. Subsequently the governors of the hospital and burgesses of the borough worked together to make improvements in the town, and interacted in ways that bolstered their authority. In 1565 the hospital lent the mayor 'and brethren' of Abingdon 42s 8d, 'laid out by James Fisher for the new charter concerning the Mayor's court'.[81] In 1566 hospital and borough each contributed £10 to building a town storehouse. Improvements could be both practical and prestigious. The appearance of the town concerned the town council, and it tried to deal with the common urban problems of nuisances such as rubbish and wandering pigs, of danger like fire, and the provision of amenities such as lighting and water supply. Not all expenditure was on essential items. The governors of the hospital invested over £7 on the land behind the almshouses 'where before was nothing but stinking ditches and filthy dunghills very unwholesome and noisome to the poor people'. An area was enclosed in 1580 and laid out as gardens, partly to provide a

[80] Challenor, p. 120.
[81] CHA, Accounts 1553-1606.

plot for each almsman or woman to grow herbs and flowers.[82] In 1583 the chamberlain paid a local painter 7s to gild the vane on the market house.[83]

Many town governments made the re-founding of schools that had lapsed during the dissolution period a priority. In York, for example, two grammar schools had replaced two monastic schools by 1565. In the same period the former monastic towns of Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans both gained new schools endowed by the Bacon family.[84] Again the borough and the hospital worked together to find a patron. The Court of Augmentations accounts do not show any provision for a school after the dissolution, nor was one mentioned in the charter. It seems possible that the abbey's school was more or less defunct until a new school was established but inadequately endowed by John Roysse, an Abingdon-born London mercer. Roysse's endowment only allowed £6 13s 4d for the schoolmaster, and there was nothing available to pay an assistant master. The borough found premises for the new school, and Christ's Hospital put on a dinner for 'Justice Southcote and his retinue coming to Abingdon for the opening of the new school' at the cost of 33s 1d in 1562.[85] Both also regularly contributed to the salary of the schoolmaster. By 1567 the corporation had allocated an almshouse room and extra pay of £2 12s p.a. and Christ's Hospital added another £2 p.a. to the schoolmaster's salary 'for teaching poor men's children'.[86]

---

[82] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 32-3.
[83] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, Vol. II, 88v.
[84] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 94; Palliser, *Tudor York,* p. 222; Patterson, *Urban Patronage in Early Modern England,* p. 51.
[85] CHA, Accounts, 1561-2; According to Preston, Southcote was a serjeant-at-law who had bought the manor of Drayton and was acting as Roysse's advisor. Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 296.
[86] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 297ff, 328.

The corporation, and to a lesser extent Christ's Hospital, took every opportunity to restore as much prestige to the town as was possible. The only administrative premises granted to the borough were the market house in the Bury, so there was a requirement for public buildings. The charter had granted the corporation the reversion of the leases of the former abbey's water mills, fulling mills and fisheries. By exchanging these for premises to the south of the abbey gateway in 1560, the new corporation was able to establish its own administrative headquarters on the former abbey site. The former St. John's Hospital had included the almoner's hall and court, the hospital ward and various chambers. The ward became a court-room, a council chamber was made on the upper floor, and the almoner's hall was later used for the new grammar school. The corporation also obtained the porter's lodge and the room over the abbey gateway, which was turned into a prison.[87] This acquisition gave the new administration a direct link with the old centre of power in the town: the new guildhall overlooked the market place from the gateway, once an outward symbol of the abbey's authority. The borough spent £13 on the 'Yelde' hall between 1563 and 1565. In addition, according to the detailed account recorded by the chamberlain, the market house in the Bury was rebuilt in 1565-6 at a cost of £26 2s 7d, using six loads of stone from Burford and twenty trees from the wood at Besselsleigh. In 1565 the corporation also repaired Burford House (the publicly maintained lavatories near the Thames) at a cost of over £3, and spent £4 on street paving in 1568.[88] The corporation incorporated covenants in some leases to improve aspects of town life in ways that saved on direct expenditure. In 1570 Robert Harper was granted a 41 year lease on a garden ground in West St. Helen's Street at an annual rental of 16d, on condition that he 'during his life sufficiently keep and may reline the coverings of

---

[87] ABA, Verney Deeds, 21; Cox, *Peace and War,* pp. 16f.
[88] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, f.70d ff.

lead roofs and the healings of gutters and pipes of lead and all the glass windows of the chancel of St. Helen's'.[89] After 1594 tenants regularly covenanted to maintain the pavement in the street in front of their properties.

It was one thing to improve the image and appearance of the town, however, and quite another to establish its reputation in the wider world. Relations between the new institutions and the wider world had the potential to enhance the town's importance. On the other hand outside interference could threaten the independence of the elite families. Towns like Abingdon faced the possibility that, with the loss of traditional seigneurial authority, outside groups or individuals that were not traditionally part of the urban milieu, such as regional gentry, professionals or court officials, would become involved with town government.[90] This was indeed what happened prior to the incorporations of the 1550s, but the patronage of Sir John Mason evidently protected the town's government from the interference of outsiders. His influence had been crucial in the establishment of the hospital and the borough, but did not extend beyond his death in 1566. Mason probably rarely visited Abingdon, but kept a tight grip on the hospital through Oliver Hyde, 'preordained my deputy in any absence to commune with you and to do all such things as shall be for the better government of the hospital as if I were there myself', according to Mason's letter to the governors dated 15 April 1554.[91] Roger Amyce, Mason's associate, had been a governor since the grant of letters patent, but it is not clear whether he represented Mason's or his own interests. The governors met Amyce's expenses for a visit to Abingdon in 1560, and presumably he expected to succeed Mason as master. The accounts for 1566, the year of Mason's death, mention a payment for copying laws

[89] Mayor's Book, p. 24.
[90] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 20.
[91] CHA, List of Governors and Masters from 1553.

and orders made by Mason; these laws and orders are reproduced in the minute book, stating that Mason was in office for life, after which the governors could choose their new master.[92] There is no way of knowing whether this had really been laid down by Mason, but it seems possible that the governors resisted Amyce's continued active involvement, perhaps because he was not an important enough figure to merit their compliance. There is a strong hint of this in a letter of December 1566 from Amyce (at home in Essex) in response to being given late notice of the hospital audit. He complains that 'you require answer of your letter by the bringer of it, and he would not tarry the receipt thereof, which causeth me to think you care not whether I come or no, yet I come God willing'.[93] Amyce claimed in the letter that the hospital had been established 'by his means', and he was duly elected master for 1567 and 1568, but after that there is no evidence of his active involvement. He received occasional gifts from the governors, but his death in 1574 was not marked with any commemorative expenditure, whereas money had been given to the poor to mark Sir John Mason's funeral.[94]

As far as Sir John Mason's involvement in the borough is concerned it is not certain whether his role as high steward was ever formalised. He presumably nominated Abingdon's first MP, Oliver Hyde (in 1558 and 1562) and its second MP in 1559 was Robert Byng, Mason's step-daughter's husband (a Kentish gentleman). Mason nominated Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester as his successor as Chancellor of Oxford University in 1564, and Leicester's involvement with Abingdon dates from Mason's death in 1566. Parliamentary patronage was generally of mutual benefit to town and patron and was viewed as an enhancement rather than a threat; Leicester

[92] CHA, Minutes, f.4.
[93] BRO D/EP7/94. I am grateful to Dr. Manfred Brod for this reference.
[94] CHA, Accounts, 1566. According to Preston Amyce was master in 1574, but this is questionable.

was a highly desirable choice and much sought after by a number of towns.[95] Anthony Forster of Cumnor, a member of Leicester's clientele, was MP for Abingdon in 1566, 1571 and 1572.[96] Leicester's influence in Berkshire had grown steadily since he was first appointed lieutenant of Windsor Castle in 1559, and by the 1570s he had become high steward of Abingdon and of the three other Berkshire towns on the Thames, Windsor, Reading and Wallingford. His role as supervisor of the elections of Berkshire MPs involved him with the alliances and disputes between county gentry. The government of the town was only occasionally affected by county politics, such as when the dispute between the Unton and Norris families came to a head in Abingdon with a violent affray at the quarter sessions in 1571.[97] This may have been due to the power and influence of the town's early patrons. Neither of the two gentry families that were based in Abingdon made efforts to exert an independent influence in the town. Oliver Hyde had acted as Mason's deputy at the hospital and had predeceased his patron in 1565, leaving a young relative to inherit his Abingdon interests. The first Thomas Reade of Barton died in 1556, and his widow Anne and son Thomas became members of the Earl of Leicester's clientele. Anne's son-in-law, Richard Beake of Reading, was Leicester's nominee to succeed Anthony Forster in 1572, and Leicester stayed at Barton in 1584.[98] Leicester's marriage to Lettice Knollys (the dowager countess of Essex) in 1576 consolidated and extended his local connections; his father-in-law, Sir Francis Knollys, lived near Henley at Rotherfield Greys.[99] Leicester was granted an annuity of 5 marks for life in 1581, but he may

---

[95] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 175, 232; Patterson, *Urban Patronage in Early Modern England,* pp. 13ff.
[96] Hasler (ed.), *The House of Commons 1558-1603,* I, 113-14; II, 145-6. Forster was related both to the Norris and the Williams families.
[97] *CPR, Eliz. I,* V (1569-72), 479.
[98] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* pp. 425-6.
[99] S. Adams, 'Dudley, Robert, earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk: 2117/view/article/8160, accessed 29 April 2010]

have resigned his high stewardship of the town to Sir Henry Norris, whose son Edward was MP in 1584 and 1589.[100] The expected result of the interaction between high stewards, MPs and the town was mutual support, as evinced by an early hospital minute 'to practice with him that shall be burgess for the town the next parliament' to procure a bill to control the level of the Thames to allow for bridge repairs.[101] In the 1590s two leading townsmen were returned, both former mayors, William Braunche and Francis Little after Norris 'lost interest' in parliamentary patronage. For the first time since Oliver Hyde died this gave the town the opportunity to be represented by local men who had its interests completely at heart.[102]

The development and negotiation of formal and informal relationships with important figures, both in London and in the county, were vital to the establishment of Abingdon as a borough and to its continued independence. The chamberlain's accounts show that expenses were paid for trips to London made on the town's behalf, usually by the town clerk or its legal adviser.[103] Records of deferential behaviour tell us the names of the people that the town wanted to cultivate. Ceremonial events and gifts, though adding to civic expenditure, promoted the image of the town, both to outsiders and to local people. Patterson points out that gifts and hospitality were symbols of connection and reciprocity that supported the business of government by providing communication between central and local authorities. On the whole Abingdon's gifts were a response to the offices held by judges, the sheriff, JPs, lawyers, archdeacons and bishops. Occasionally gifts were made to and received from

---

[100] I am grateful to Dr. Manfred Brod for this information: the document granting the annuity is in the archive at Longleat House, Dudley Papers, Box 3, 55r.
[101] CHA, Minutes, f.15. The minute dates from between 1567 and 1577. There is no evidence that such a bill was ever presented.
[102] Hasler (ed.), *The House of Commons 1558-1603,* I, 114.
[103] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, 1558, 1559, 1571.

local gentry, signifying reciprocal obligation.[104] The town made regular gifts to Mr. Roysse, the benefactor to the new grammar school.[105] The prestigious patronage of the Earl of Leicester was marked by gifts both to him and to his nominee as MP, Anthony Forster, between 1569 and 1584. Leicester himself had sent presents of robes to the corporation in 1566.[106] In 1572 Anthony Forster left a bequest to the mayor of Abingdon.[107] The borough chamberlain's account records gifts to Lord Norris in 1573, 1577 and 1582, suggesting that he had become more closely associated with the town. However the Earl of Leicester clearly was by far the most important patron. When he travelled through Abingdon in 1584 the corporation spent nearly 50s, which included a gallon of claret and a gallon of sack delivered to Mr. Reade's at Barton Court.[108] Deferential gestures demanded a response of general goodwill towards the community. Leicester travelled through Abingdon three times between October 1584 and August 1585, each time distributing largesse to servants, poor people and musicians.[109] Corporations would go out of their way to treat visitors well, out of deference and for any benefit that might come their way.[110] In the spring of 1589 St. Helen's burial register records the reception in Abingdon at different times of two distinguished corpses en route for burial. Sir William Winter's coffin was kept overnight at the New Inn and the Earl of Worcester's coffin at St. Helen's church; both arrivals and departures were marked by bell-ringing.[111] Very little is known

---

[104] Patterson, *Urban Patronage,* pp. 24,21.
[105] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, 1563, 1569, 1570.
[106] Hasler (ed.), *The House of Commons 1558-1603,* II, 146.
[107] Cumnor Parish Record, Index of Wills, Item 147
[http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/external/cumnor/wills-summaries.htm. accessed 28 April 2010].
[108] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, Vol. I, 1570, 1571; Vol. II, f.55. In addition the Earl of Leicester's bearward was paid 6s 8d in 1576.
[109] *Household Accounts and Disbursement Books of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester,* ed. S. Adams (Camden Soc., 5th Series, 6, 1995), 189f., 216-7, 289. On these journeys Leicester was travelling between Henley and Witney, where he owned Cornbury House.
[110] Patterson, *Urban Patronage,* p. 19.
[111] Sir William Winter was buried at Lydney in Gloucestershire; he had died in London 19 days previously. D. Loades, 'Winter, Sir William (*c.*1525–1589)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, Sept

about how the town generally honoured important people who travelled through the town, but whether alive or dead their presence enhanced civic image.

Conclusion

Political reconstruction had put Abingdon men officially and directly in charge of the townspeople. Their activities confirmed that this group had already developed ability, strength and a commitment to the town before the events of the reformation. They successfully steered Abingdon's development, although without the vitality and growth of the town's economy much less might have been achieved. Nevertheless, in the decades that followed incorporation the town's leaders put in place policies that prioritised social stability, economic security and civic values. In doing so they established a new 'template for the political, social and economic practice of citizens', that emphasised communal values.[112] But it would be a mistake to assume that they wanted to see the development of a 'small commonwealth'. The policies that Abingdon was initiating were innovatory for the town, but harked back to the medieval traditions of older and larger boroughs.[113] The town's leading men after incorporation looked backwards in terms of the role held by the hospital in town government. The hospital represented continuity with the town's past, and claimed superiority over the borough: 'in those times the two corporations did agree like two sisters, the younger (which is the town) gave place and took directions from the elder, which is the hospital'.[114] Mason's statutes for the hospital required that its legal counsellor be also employed by the town 'so that one man might serve both offices

---

2004; online edn, Oct 2009 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/29769, accessed 26 March 2010] The Earl of Worcester had also died in London, and his body was en route to Raglan for burial.

[112] Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth,* p. 267.

[113] MacCaffrey, *Exeter 1540-1640,* pp. 280-1.

[114] Christ's Hospital record 1034-5 quoted by Baker, *Historic Abingdon,* p. 7.

and also have a fee from the town of 40s'.[115] It has already been suggested that the highly oligarchic nature of Christ's Hospital may have appealed to Mason, and as a closed shop in comparison to the town council it almost certainly appealed to those members of the town's elite who were elected governors. We do not know how happy a place Abingdon was in the 1550s, but it was evidently well organised and there is no evidence of political or social conflict. Oligarchic institutions and a hierarchical society, both dominated by men of business, had been dominant features of pre-reformation Abingdon, and remained so after 1556. Much of what was achieved in administrative terms depended on economic and social development, and this will be the subject of the next chapter.

[115] This rule held until well into the 1600s. Baker, *Historic Abingdon,* pp. 8ff.

Chapter 9

The Renewal and Development of Abingdon after 1556: Economy and Society

Now that we understand how the new governing elite developed its new jurisdiction and authority, it remains necessary to discuss non-institutional aspects of Abingdon's development after 1556. The previous chapter has demonstrated the continuity in town leadership between the pre- and post-dissolution period, and discussed some of the financial and social advantages that incorporation could offer to the elite. Tittler saw the incorporation of towns as a desirable development for many communities in response to different pressures after the reformation. The acquisition of greater fiscal self-reliance and control of local resources was, he suggested, the answer to the need for a new secular and civic culture. The subsequent expansion of oligarchic rule in incorporated towns was a result of social and economic pressures, and also of the Crown's strategy of delegating power to local officials.[1] But the establishment of town government in local institutional hands is only half the story of Abingdon's post-reformation recovery.

The viability of the town's new institutions was strongly linked with economic vitality and social cohesion. While it is undeniable that the economic and social circumstances of ordinary townspeople had much to gain from the orderly government that evidently resulted from incorporation, it is important to question to what extent Abingdon's development depended on institutional factors. Earlier chapters of this study have discussed the relative strengths of small town economies and societies, and have underlined the importance of economic and social factors in Abingdon's survival during the uncertainties of the post-dissolution years. In this

[1] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 336.

context we need to consider Christopher Dyer's suggestion that the informal government of many unincorporated towns was often effectively run as well as being less restrictive than that of 'over-governed' towns, and that the lack of a charter was no hamper to how a town operated in national commercial networks.[2] How crucial were the incorporations of the 1550s to the workings of the town's economy and society? It seems best to answer questions about the role of the new institutions in the larger picture of town life after looking first at the economy and secondly at society in the post-incorporation period.

Economic development

It has already been noted that there were no long-term economic problems caused by the dissolution in Abingdon, mainly due to the strength and diversity of the town's economic life. Abingdon's broadly based economy saved it from the instability that affected the many towns that specialised in cloth production after the 1550s. Abingdon's geographical location continued to work in its favour, so that the town could benefit from the stimulation in domestic trade caused by population growth and political stability. The rising demand for foodstuffs accelerated the trend for commercial agriculture to replace subsistence farming. In north Berkshire the balance had already shifted from rural cloth production to commercial arable production. The grain from the cornlands of Oxfordshire and Berkshire was shipped to London via the 'great river ports' of Reading, Henley and Windsor. In general the development of long-distance trade, especially to London, improved the prosperity of local marketing centres. There was a connection between the rapid expansion of corn production after 1570 and population growth. London's requirements grew in particular when its

[2] C. Dyer, 'Small places with large consequences', pp. 21-2.

population doubled once between 1534 and 1582, and again by 1605.[3] We need to find out the role that inland trade played in Abingdon's economy in the second half of the sixteenth century, and identify what activities in general supported its economic development.

An analysis of occupational structure can be useful to highlight economic trends and fluctuations in an early modern urban community. The discussion below is based on an analysis, shown in Figs. 10 and 11 (pp. 255-6), of the occupations of 576 individuals who lived and worked in Abingdon during the 75 years between 1525 and 1600. The widest range of records available has been used including wills and inventories, town and Christ's Hospital accounts and parish registers. This gives the opportunity to represent a wider section of the community than is given by a single source such as freemen's records or wills, inventories and administrations.[4]

Such an analysis is not without its difficulties. One particular problem is caused by multiple occupations, and whether it is possible to determine someone's main occupation. Food production was an important feature of the life of the town, which was surrounded by agricultural activity that continued to involve a significant proportion of urban householders, some of whom were husbandmen and labourers. Townsmen of every variety could and did have agricultural interests, such as Thomas Perkins, a tailor who lived in Ock Street, who owned four farm animals and an acre of

---

[3] J.A. Chartres, 'Food consumption and internal trade', in A.L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500-1700* (London, 1986), p. 180; Jackson, 'Clothmaking and the economy of Abingdon', pp. 76-7; Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', pp. 514, 520; F.J. Fisher, 'Development of the London food market 1540-1640', *Ec.HR,* 5:2 (1935), 46-64.

[4] See Appendix 4. A similar analysis has been undertaken by Christine Jackson based on a sample of Abingdon wills between 1540 and 1599, 'Clothmaking and the economy of Abingdon', p. 70.

wheat when he died in 1557.[5] By the end of the period, as we shall see, many townsmen were also involved in malt production as a secondary occupation, and that too will not show up in this analysis. In the tables below the category 'food production' is used for men for whom this was their main occupation.

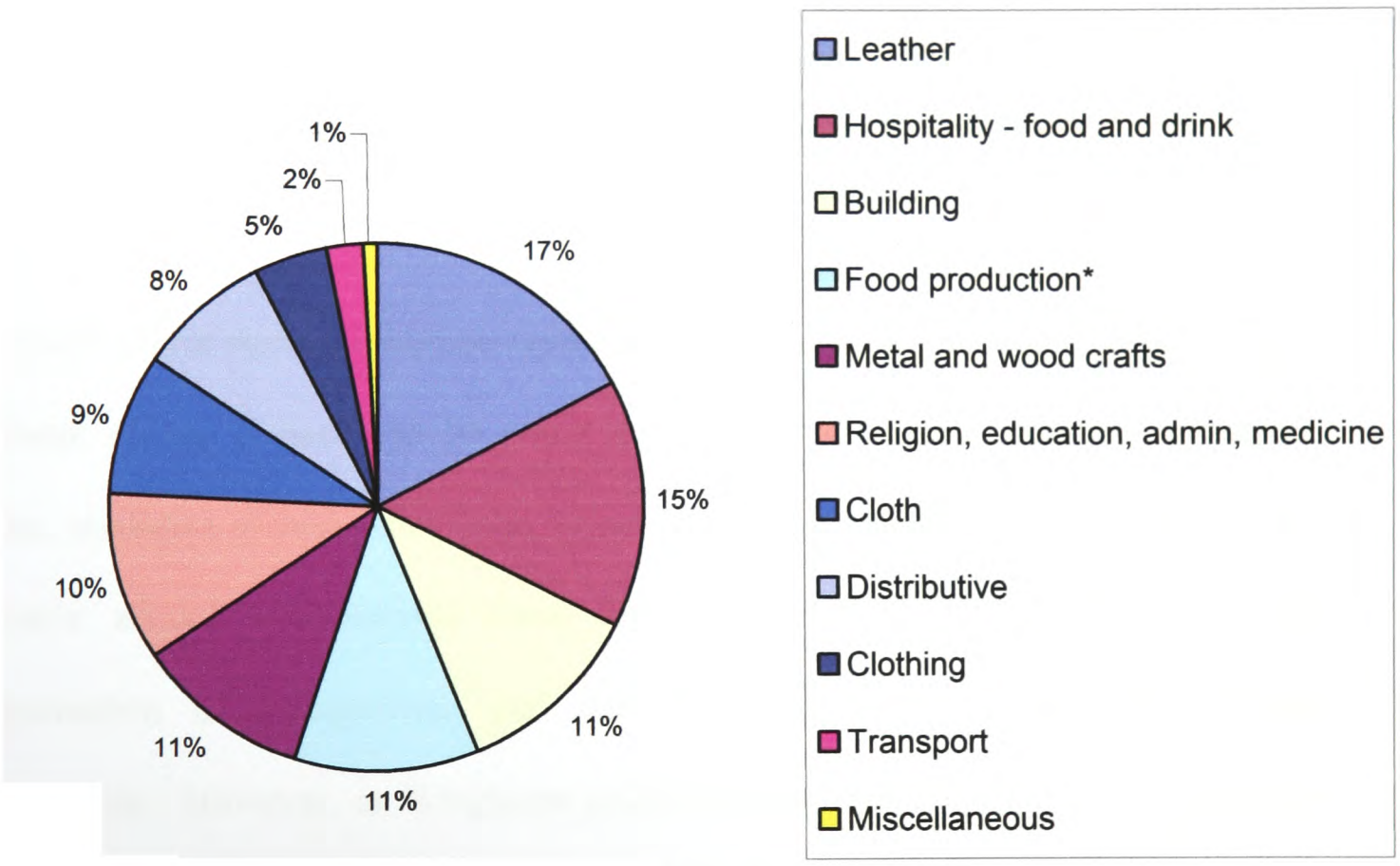
Occupational terminology is also problematic. The term 'yeoman' was used sparingly in sixteenth century Abingdon, and invariably had little to do with occupation, but was an indicator of a status that was below 'gentleman'. Ralph Hammond, a well-off builder (carpenter) worth over £100 who also had a small agricultural enterprise, was described as yeoman in his will.[6] Where a yeoman's or gentleman's main occupation is known they have been included in the statistics. 'Husbandman' was used in Abingdon for men occupied in food production who in other localities would be described as 'yeoman' in terms of their agricultural status and worth. 'Labourer' was also often used for men working in agriculture but they were of very variable status: some of their inventories indicate a level of prosperity that might qualify them to be called a 'husbandman' in other communities.[7] In 1596 Thomas Greene was the tenant of the farm of Lacey's Court, and described as labourer in the burial register and husbandman in his will.[8] At the bottom end of the social scale there are many references to servants in wills and in parish registers, but it is often not clear whether they are employed domestically or vocationally. Only those servants and apprentices whose occupations can be identified are included in the analysis. The use of the term 'apprentice' itself was only occasional and confusing. An example of this is found in

---

[5] BRO D/A1/207/22 (administration of Thomas Perkins, 16 January 1558).
[6] BRO D/A1/77/67 (will of Raphe Hawmon, 21 June 1591).
[7] These problems are found elsewhere, see N. Evans, 'The occupations and status of male testators in Cambridgeshire 1551-1800', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 180ff.
[8] BRO D/A1/191/83 (inventory of Thomas Greene, 12 July 1596).

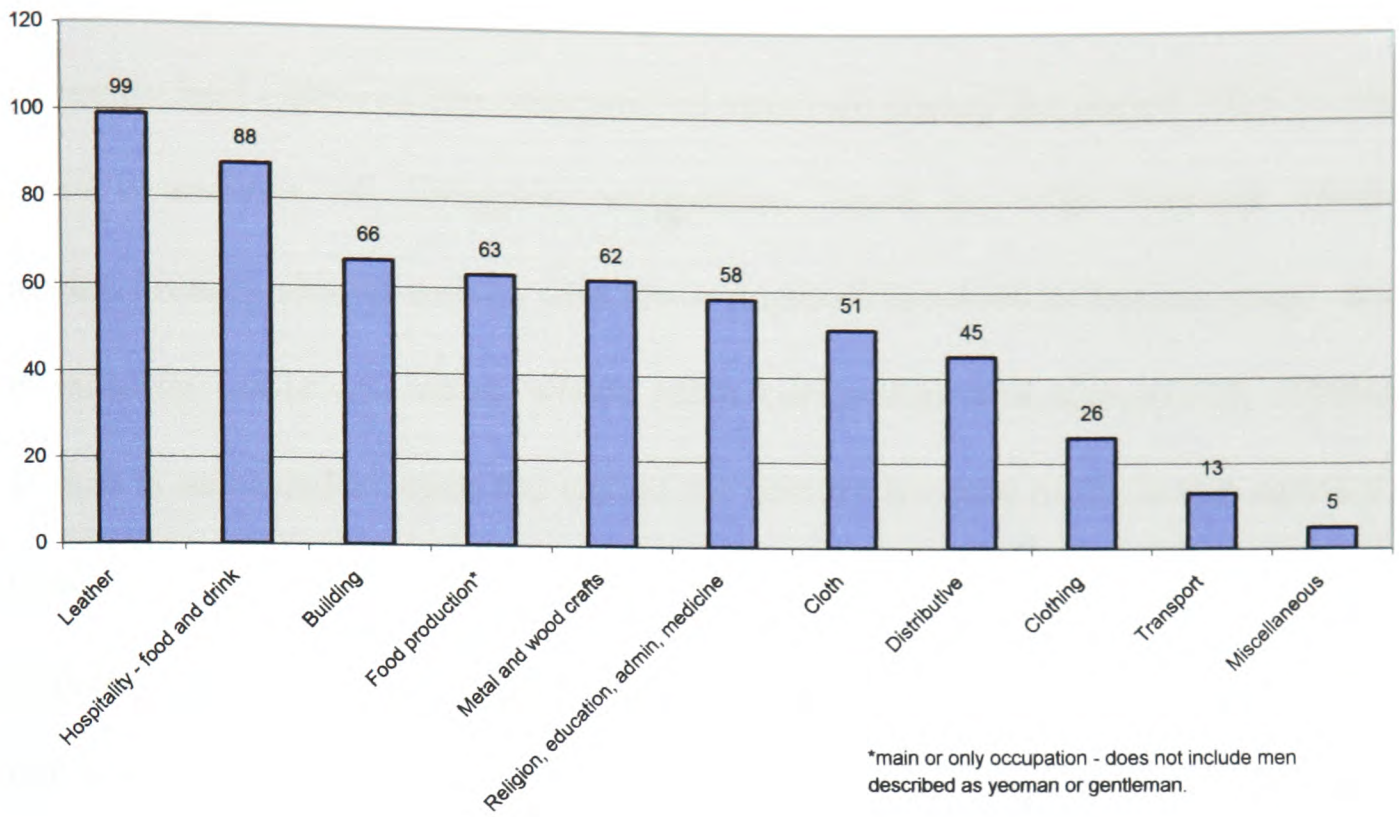
the wills of Roger Cook, broadweaver, and his widow, Joan, who only survived him by one year. Cook mentioned his two apprentices by name, but by the time Joan made her will she referred to one as an apprentice and the other as a servant.[9] Due to this type of difficulty, although servants probably formed the most numerous social group in the town, they are not well represented in the analysis below.

Fig. 10: Occupational structure of Abingdon 1525-1600



[9] BRO MF 10043/A B/213 (will of Joan Cook, 18 March 1569).

Fig. 11: Numbers in different occupational categories in Abingdon 1525-1600



The charts above show a broad occupational spread in Abingdon, with no particularly dominant group. It needs to be noted that the group headed religion, education, admin., medicine is misleadingly large due to the turnover of clergy and of masters at Roysse's school. Historians have taken many different approaches to the categorisation of occupations, and this does not assist comparisons between communities. However, as Wrightson points out, surveys of occupational structures of sixteenth century towns generally highlight five broad occupational categories: distributive trades, manufacturing, food and drink processing and retailing, building trades, professionals.[10] In many towns a single occupational group was dominant, such as Colchester and Norwich where in the same period textiles accounted for over a quarter of the occupational structure, and Worcester where up to half the businesses

[10] Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* p. 37; N. Goose, 'Household size and structure in early-Stuart Cambridge', in J. Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1990), pp. 119-20.

in the town were cloth-related.[11] In Henley between 1531 and 1700 almost half of the occupations were connected with hospitality, food and drink and the river trade.[12]. In Abingdon workers in the leather, metal, wood, textiles and building trades accounted for roughly half (48%) of the occupational structure during the period 1525 to 1600. Jackson's analysis of Abingdon occupations based on wills between 1540-99 provided broadly similar trends, with lower numbers involved in leather, metal, wood and building crafts and more whose main occupation was agricultural. Although evidence is weighted towards the end of the century because of the better survival of probate and other administrative material, Jackson's findings demonstrated relative occupational stability, with only limited change between the periods 1540-69 and 1570-99.[13]

The most commonly recorded of over seventy-five different recorded occupations were as follows, in order:

1. shoemaker
2. labourer
3. weaver
4. butcher
5. draper
6. mercer/chandler
7. glover
8. tailor
9. baker
10. mason
11. sawyer
12. carpenter
13. innholder
14. tanner
15. fuller.[14]

But the occupational evidence shows that the town had much more to offer than the average market town in the way of specialised crafts and services: cutlers, pewterers, parchment makers, plumbers, glaziers, barbers, vintners, an ornamental smith, a haberdasher and musicians. After the 1550s Abingdon attracted a growing and varied

---

[11] *VCH, Essex,* IX , 76-87; A. Dyer, 'The urban economy', p. 340.
[12] Townley, *Henley-on-Thames*, p. 74.
[13] Jackson, 'Clothmaking and the economy of Abingdon', p. 70.
[14] See Appendix 4.

group of individuals that offered professional services: clerks, scriveners, schoolmasters and surgeons.

Abingdon's balanced and broad occupational structure is probably typical for a town without a major specialisation, and this was an important factor in the town's economic stability. Abingdon's entrepreneurial shopkeepers, drapers, mercers and chandlers who combined distributive, wholesale and retail functions continued to be unusually numerous throughout the period. There were as many drapers in Abingdon as mercers and chandlers put together. In many localities mercers dominated small town government, but in Abingdon the most influential men tended to be drapers.[15] The status of drapers among Abingdon's trades is also indicated by one of the early Orders of Council in Abingdon in 1557, setting charges for stalls at markets and fairs. Linen and woollen drapers were to be charged 4d per stall on each occasion; this was two times or four times as much as the other named tradesmen – tanners, ironmongers and smiths, ropers and collarmakers.[16]

The analysis shown below of surviving inventory totals of over £50 in the second half of the sixteenth century is an indication of the sections of the occupational structure that generated wealth.

---

[15] K. Tiller, 'Shopkeeping in 17th-century Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia,* 62 (1997), 273; Marcombe, *English Small Town Life: Retford,* pp. 105, 125.
[16] Challenor, p. 122.

Table 9: Abingdon inventories totalling £50 and over taken between 1550-1600

Leather	**Hospitality**	**Building**	**Food production**	**Professional**	**Distributive**
Cordwainer	Innholder	Carpenter	Agriculture	Vicar	Mercer/chandler
£58	£112	£102	£61*	£82	£162
Tanner	£66		£80		£53
£55	£50		£57		£79
£207	Vintner		£122		£224
Saddler	£370*		£132		Draper/clothier
£72	£96*		£79		£91*
			£418		£119*
			£77		£106
			£186		£148
			£54		£57
			£204*		£357*
			Miller		Grocer
			£80*		£161
					Haberdasher
					£132
Average	**Average**	**Average**	**Average**	**Average**	**Average**
£98	**£138**	**£102**	**£129**	**£82**	**£141**

* represents an individual who held office in town government

The results are indicative rather than conclusive, partly because inventories have their limitations as a source. Totals can be misleading, and inventories do not survive for anything like all the town's leading inhabitants.[17] The table shows that the wealthiest men in the sample were involved in the distributive trades.[18] The next most important group were the inn holders and vintners who catered for passing travellers as well as local requirements. Close behind was the significantly large group involved in food production. The 1560 subsidy list generally supports this picture. Thirteen paid on lands; the highest payments were made by representatives of Abingdon's only two

[17] See Arkell, Evans and Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part,* especially Arkell, 'Interpreting probate inventories', pp. 72-102; and M. Overton, J. Whittle, D. Dean and A. Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, 2004), pp. 14ff, 138. Probate inventories rarely survive for the wealthiest 10% of the sixteenth century community whose wills were proved in one of the two Prerogative Courts of Canterbury and York, p. 170.

[18] The vintners and the haberdasher might be included in this group, see below.

gentry families: Oliver Hyde, Abingdon's first M.P., and Anne Reade of Barton, widow of the Audletts' heir. Of the twenty-two who paid on goods, the highest assessed were drapers and mercers.[19] Alan Everitt viewed mercantile probate inventories as indicators of the size and status of a town, and expected these to average £80-£90 in a middle-sized town.[20] The relatively high average totals shown above for Abingdon merchants is a strong pointer to the town's wealth.

This is only one of a number of indications of the prosperity of Abingdon's businessmen that underpinned Abingdon's post-reformation development. Better-off tradesmen were able to use their own or borrowed capital to invest in new projects. They rebuilt or improved the property they had acquired after the dissolutions, in a similar way to the townsmen of nearby Woodstock who were able to rebuild many of the former chantry houses granted to them in 1565.[21] The exchange of agricultural and manufactured goods within the town and between townspeople and the local country people continued to be at the core of Abingdon's economy.[22] But there were two main factors that brought economic stability and wealth to the town and drove the town's economic expansion after the 1550s. Both were associated with long distance trade with London. The first was the continuing development of distributive, retailing and hospitality trades. The second was the expansion of commercial agriculture, particularly associated with the growth of the malt trade.

Through its distributive trades Abingdon's dealings continued to extend beyond the north Berkshire and south Oxfordshire villages within the immediate catchment area

---

[19] TNA E179/74/216.
[20] Everitt, 'Marketing of agricultural produce', p. 489.
[21] *VCH, Oxon,* XII, 360-72.
[22] K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* pp. 93f.

of the weekly market and Bury shops. This was a continuation of a previously established trading pattern.[23] Although it is impossible to know how businesses were split between retail and wholesale, there were specialist businesses that fostered Abingdon's continuing development as a relatively sophisticated trading centre in the second half of the sixteenth century. Cuthbert Harris, an Abingdon fishmonger, supplied stock in the late 1580s to a chandler in Burford.[24] Abingdon's vintners may also have had a distributive function, as perhaps did James Ryder, haberdasher. Ryder, who died in 1585, had a thriving business in the Bury with such a quantity of stock, mainly felts, that this accounted for a large proportion of his inventory total of over £130. He had two looking glasses in his shop, so evidently he received customers in the shop. His clientele was certainly drawn from well beyond the town itself.[25] It is thought that most towns had permanent shops by 1600, but the inventories of Abingdon's shopkeepers show that by the second half of the sixteenth century the town's retailing had already developed beyond market day sales and was shop-based.[26] Although the Mayott family, Abingdon's leading family, diversified their business activities during the second half of the sixteenth century, they continued with their core manufacturing and retail drapery business through successive generations. Richard Mayott's will in 1579 leaves 'all the cloth and wares within the shop and all the chests there and all my wool and yarn' to his son.[27] Lionel Welford was another draper still involved in cloth production whose family business originated in the pre-dissolution era: he left £200 worth of stock in his shop as well as wool, yarn, a beam and scales in his wool loft.[28]

---

[23] See pp. 157-8.
[24] *Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of Witney 1538-1610*, eds. Bolton and Maslen, p. 122.
[25] BRO/D/A1/111/75 (inventory of James Ryder, 11 February 1585).
[26] J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects,* pp. 118ff.
[27] TNA PROB/11/61 (will of Richard Mayott, 5 August 1579).
[28] BRO D/A1/133/190 (inventory of Lionel Welford, 28 July 1596).

While townspeople and local country people provided retailers with their bread and butter income, the town offered shopping, entertainment and services that were attractive to a wider and sometimes more sophisticated audience. John Brache, a cutler who died in 1587, stocked rapiers, swords, daggers and a 'pynado'.[29] Two surviving inventories of Abingdon barbers indicate a reasonably affluent business, although that of John Meadowe's was augmented by small-scale arable production.[30] Surgeons also received custom from outside the town, like the vicar of Hanney in 1555 who 'died of surgery', or 'the stranger who came from Faringdon, a Welshman with a sore hand, who died at Thornhill's the surgeon' in 1570.[31] The north Berkshire gentry shopped in the town, for example in 1559 Hugh Carter, shoemaker, was owed for shoes by several gentlemen who lived within a ten mile radius of Abingdon.[32] Gentry also borrowed money from leading townsmen. George Clifford of Hanney, who married Oliver Wellesbourne's widow, owed £6 13s 4d to 'Mr. Mayott at Abingdon'.[33] Although there is no evidence of close relations between town and county, local gentry families visited the town for the assizes and used St. Helen's church for occasional services. Abingdon's innholders were important and affluent men in the community, catering for the better-off visitors and travellers. Robert Charlton's inn is not named but it was one of the largest, either the Hart or the Antelope (also known as the New), with twenty-one beds in ten rooms. His inventory at £93 indicates that he offered a high standard of accommodation, and prospered

---

[29] BRO D/A1/175/112 (administration of John Brache, 13 December 1587).
[30] BRO D/A1/181/150 (will of John Meadowes, 6 November 1579); BRO D/A1/203 (administration of Nicholas Marcham, 23 September 1602)
[31] St. Helen's Burial Register, Vol. I. In Abingdon barbers do not appear to have doubled up as surgeons, as in many communities, but John Mannock, who died in 1557, was both a glover and a surgeon.
[32] BRO D/A1/51/125 (inventory of Hugh Carter, 11 August, 1559).
[33] BRO D/A1/51/1846 (inventory of George Clifford of West Hanney, October 1557).

enough to hold a lease of land in Bayworth worth £30. At different times The Lamb offered eleven beds in four rooms, the Bell eight in two rooms, the Bear twelve in five rooms.[34] Guests were expected to share beds and the town's inns must have been able to accommodate well over a hundred travellers. Rabson at the Bell had dealings with Oxfordshire men from Oxford, Deddington, Witney and Woodstock, a man from Amersham in Buckinghamshire, and a London fishmonger. The entries in the burial registers also confirm Abingdon's role as a thoroughfare town, with Gloucestershire and Herefordshire the most often mentioned destinations. Ordinary Abingdon householders also offered lodging, presumably on an informal and less expensive basis to more ordinary visitors. Richard Shaw, buried at St. Helen's church at Christmastime in 1596, was 'a stranger that lay at Anthony Franklin's and who dwelt in Hereford'.

Although marketing and hospitality generated the most wealth in the town, ordinary manufacturing and food production and processing continued to provide employment. However, cloth production in Abingdon never developed from a modest to a significant specialisation, perhaps because the expansion of trade was the priority for businessmen in the town both before and after the dissolution.[35] Weavers continue to be recorded in the town throughout the sixteenth century although it is significant that Thomas Higgins, weaver of Abingdon, apprenticed his son Robert in 1558 to a Witney broadweaver, and Edward Bennett, an Abingdon woollen draper and clothier, was putting work out to a broadweaver in Witney in 1596.[36] Richard Clarke, mercer,

---

[34] BRO D/A1/51/173 (inventory of Robert Charlton, 7 May 1560); The Lamb: BRO D/A1/188/6 (inventory of Richard Ely, 20 December 1558); The Bell: BRO D/A1/111/33 (inventory of Antony Rabson, 10 July 1570); The Bear: D/A1/181/90 (inventory of Edmund Cordwell, 25 July 1579).
[35] Jackson, 'Clothmaking and the economy of Abingdon', pp. 75-8.
[36] *Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of Witney,* ed. Bolton and Maslen, pp. 30, 146.

who died in 1573, had two broad looms.[37] Christopher Duckworth, Thomas Mayott and William Eystone were all putting work out, and were loaned £40 between them by Christ's Hospital in 1579 'to set poor a work by spinning'.[38] Christopher Duckworth's inventory mentions only one narrow loom, but he had stocks of russet carsey and wool, including wool 'at spinning abroad'.[39] Abingdon, however, specialised in cloth finishing for the local area. In 1584 there were 'divers' fullers in Abingdon, according to Cuthbert Atkinson of Oxford who was required to defend his business activities in the Oxfordshire Archdeacon's Court. Atkinson was carrying cloth to Abingdon on Sundays, where he claimed that fullers were allowed to 'set the rack in the winter on Sundays before morning prayer, and so doeth most of the fullers in England if it's a fair day because sometimes there is scarce one a week'.[40] John Woodruff, fuller, leased a new house with two fulling mills built in Cosener's Close between the former abbey precinct and the Thames, and both his and Robert Werg's inventories taken in the early 1600s show that they had substantial businesses. The dyehouse in East St. Helen's Street continued to operate throughout the period.[41]

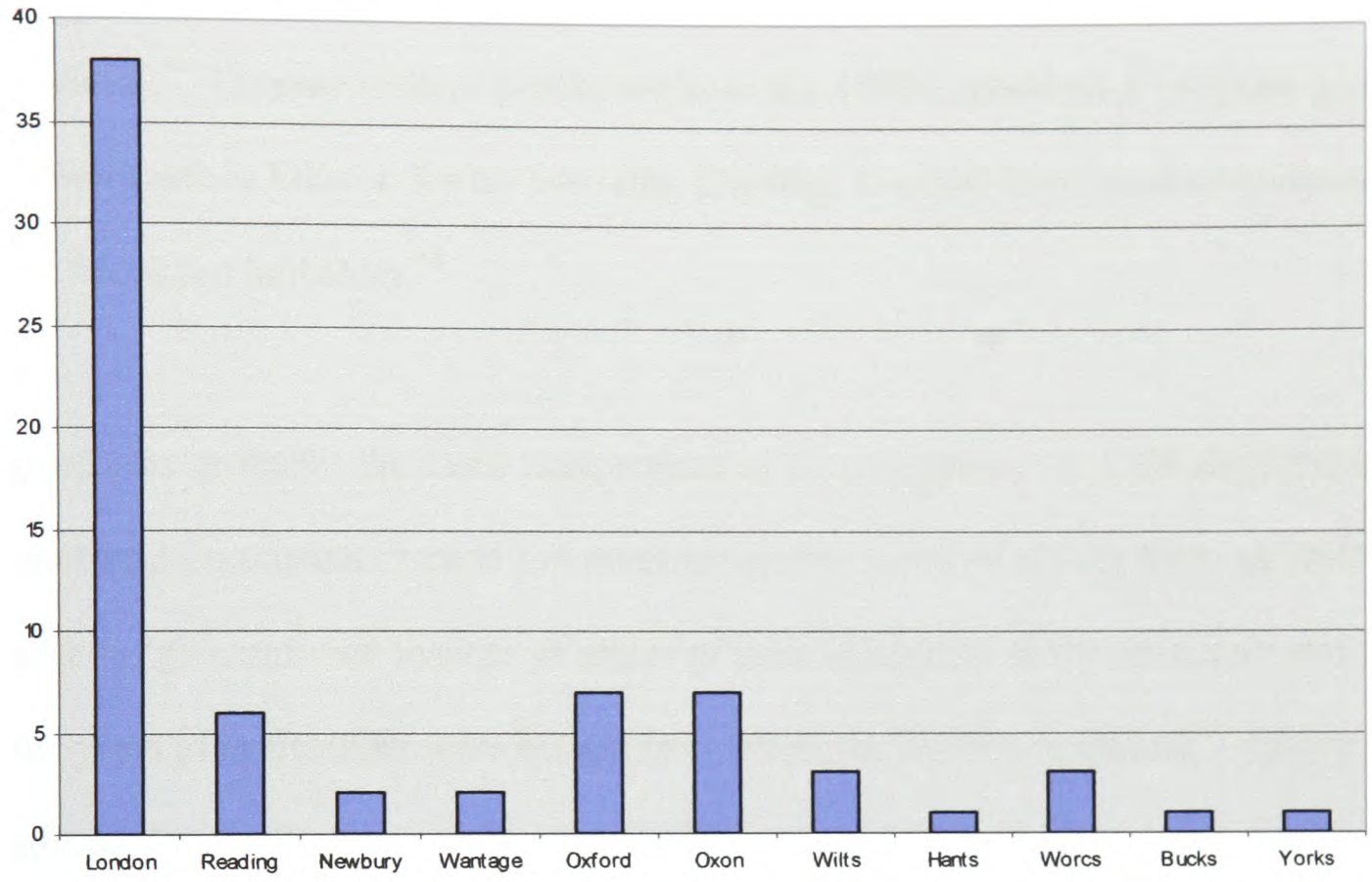
Evidence of the trading patterns of more important tradesmen, who had business in other towns, can be built up from a variety of sources, mainly wills, inventories and administrations. Although there are very few lists of debts the limited evidence that survives confirms that these men often dealt directly with London merchants. Between the 1530s and the 1610s probate evidence records seventy-one transactions

---

[37] BRO D/A1/207/150 (inventory of Richard Clarke, 25 April 1574).
[38] CHA Minutes, f.19.
[39] BRO D/A1/61/151 (inventory of Christopher Duckworth, 2 June 1585).
[40] *The Archdeacon's Court: Liber Actorum 1584,* ed. E.R.C. Brinkworth (ORS, 31, 2 vols., 1942-46), II, 192.
[41] Jackson, 'Clothmaking and the economy of Abingdon', pp. 71-2.

made by twenty-five men between Abingdon and other urban centres: of these thirty-eight were with London merchants.

Fig. 12: Recorded transactions between Abingdon men and tradesmen in other urban centres 1530s-1610s.



This confirms that Abingdon continued to act as an inland entrepôt, a primary distributive centre for goods from London. Trading patterns, already noted in the post-dissolution period, continued throughout the century.[42] William Luckins, an Abingdon mercer who died in 1586, had shop goods valued at over £80, shop debts owing to him of £97 and owed over £77 to eight London suppliers (including a draper, a haberdasher and a clothworker) and one Reading mercer.[43] Rafe Townsend, draper, who died in 1578, had shop stock valued at just under £35, and only one significant debt, £10 to Master Trott of London.[44] William Kisby, vintner, had two

[42] See pp. 157-8 for the business transactions of Abingdon mercers and drapers in the 1540s and 1550s.
[43] BRO D/A1/92/60 (account (undated) and inventory of William Luckins, 23 March 1586).
[44] BRO D/A1/126/118 (account of Ralph Townsend, 26 August 1579).

large trade debts totalling over £70 to two London vintners.[45] In 1595 three Governors of Christ's Hospital were recorded as absent due to business in London, William Braunche, Lionel Bostock (both drapers) and William Welling, saddler.[46] Goods connected with larger urban centres conveyed prestige: the will of Richard Bratwell, an Abingdon joiner, bequeathes a 'charger of the best pewter that I bought at Oxford'.[47] Thomas Gallant's will, made in the 1590s, mentions a grogram gown that was made in London for his late wife, Dorothy, who had been previously married to an Abingdon innholder.[48]

Oxford was probably the main local source of luxury goods. In 1568 the Borough Chamberlain's accounts record the purchase of four pairs of gloves from an Oxford glover to 'give unto the justices of assize at their being here at the sessions', and for some years after this they were bought from Nicholas Gibbins in Oxford.[49] Figure 12 confirms that trading contacts between Abingdon and Oxfordshire towns, especially Oxford itself, were as important as those with Berkshire towns. Abingdon's proximity to south Oxfordshire, and the importance of its position on the route from the west towards London makes this inevitable. The type of actions taken by Abingdon men against Witney men for debt demonstrates this: for example, in 1574 James Fisher, mercer, took action against Giles Jones of Witney, clothier, for £2, and in 1594 an Abingdon innholder pursued a Witney 'far carter', also for £2.[50] William Coxeter was an Abingdon carrier who died in 1606, and the debts paid by his

---

[45] BRO D/A1/200/52 (account of William Kisby, 13 June 1588).
[46] CHA, Minutes, f.29v.
[47] BRO D/A1/103/250 (will of Richard Bratwell, written 28 March 1572).
[48] TNA PROB/11/89 (will of Thomas Gallant, 4 January 1597).
[49] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, 99d.ff. Oxford gloves were nationally renowned, and therefore obviously more prestigious than Abingdon gloves. *VCH, Oxon,* IV, 74-180.
[50] *Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of Witney 1538-1610*, ed. Bolton and Maslen, pp. 50, 68, 71, 122, 139, 146, 170, 180.

administrator illustrate the town's extended trading network. The trade debts total £43, and include three large sums due to London fishmongers, and smaller sums owed to a clothier of Newbury, a mercer of Oxford, a chandler and another man in Reading, and to four men of Abingdon (a dyer, a miller, a draper and a mercer).[51]

The steady growth of long-distance trade in foodstuffs benefited many market towns, particularly those involved in the supply of food to London. The majority of the goods traded between Abingdon and London passed through Henley, which continued to be a major supplier of wood and grain to London. William Harrison speaks of 'barges which either carry passengers or bring necessary provision from all quarters of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire ...'.[52] In the 1560s and 1570s a significant proportion of London's known grain imports were sourced from Henley. The Lord Mayor answered in reply to questions about food supply in 1574 'the city hath been chiefly furnished with all kinds of grain ... from the shires lying westward ... by land as by the river Thames' as well as from other counties. By the late 1500s the supply of malt became equally important: it was cheaper to transport than unmalted barley, and more profit could be retained locally, at the point of production.[53] Most goods traded to and from Abingdon may well have gone by road to Henley, where they were loaded onto barges, but the nearby wharf at Culham for barge traffic downstream continued to be important to Abingdon's trading network. The role of river traffic at this period has been downplayed in the past, but evidence points otherwise. It is significant that John Jones of Burford left money for the road

---

[51] BRO D/A1/181/194 (account of William Coxeter, 13 April 1607) transcribed in *Berkshire Probate Accounts 1583-1712,* ed. I. Mortimer, (Berkshire Record Society, 4, 1999), pp. 55f.
[52] *The Description of England by William Harrison,* ed. G. Edelen (New York, 1968), p. 422.
[53] N.S.B. Gras, *The Evolution of the English Corn Market from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century,* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 104-6, 330-2; *Tudor Economic Documents* ed. R.H. Tawney and E. Power (London, 1924), I, 159; S. Townley, *Henley-on-Thames* pp. 61ff.

from Abingdon to Culham, and Anne Reade (widow of Katherine Audlett's heir) made a bequest to the 'making of Culham haven' in 1575.[54] There is ample evidence to show that the Thames was well-used for the carriage of goods between Abingdon and towns to the east. In 1563 the corporation paid 4s 8d for 'the carriage of Master Roysse's hogshead of wine from London to Culham in the barge', and another 8d to cart it to Abingdon.[55] The new casting of the great bell of St. Helen's in the 1590s involved a return journey to Reading and back by barge.[56] Thomas Bradford, an Abingdon grocer who died in 1593, is also described as a bargeman: his probate account shows that he had large stocks of fish (worth over £20) and credit with a London fishmonger, which might indicate that he transported his own goods from London to Abingdon.[57] Two decades earlier Thomas West of Wallingford's river trade included deliveries to Abingdon of barrels of herring, parcels of iron, bushels of bay salt and a butt of malmsey carried from London. In the 1570s West was trading in malt from the Abingdon area.[58] River traffic may well have played a far greater role in the malt trade than has been previously considered, and might explain why Abingdon's malt trade developed at the same stage as Henley-on-Thames', where the first evidence for large-scale commercial malting is in the 1590s. In Burford, further upstream, malting did not become important until the Thames was reopened for large barges below Oxford after 1635.[59]

---

[54] TNA PROB 11/30/360 (4 February 1545), TNA PROB 11/57 (3 December 1575).
[55] ABA, Chamberlain's accounts, f.50.
[56] Cox, *Peace and War,* p. 46.
[57] BRO D/A1/175/134 (account of Thomas Bradford, 15 March 1593). In the burial register entries for 1583 there is another reference to a bargeman - a John Vicars.
[58] M. Prior, 'The accounts of Thomas West of Wallingford, a sixteenth century trader on the Thames', *Oxoniensia,* 46 (1981), 73-93.
[59] Townley, *Henley-on-Thames,* pp. 68f., Catchpole, Clark and Peberdy, *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town*, p. 96.

The growth of commercial agriculture in north Berkshire was also dependent on trade with London. The opportunity to produce, process and manufacture for an export market fostered a symbiotic relationship between town and hinterland that supported investment, marketing and employment. Berkshire was already a wealthy county and the rural economies of both north Berkshire and south Oxfordshire became relatively more prosperous in the second half of the sixteenth century. Everitt considered that by 1575 Abingdon was one of the 40% of English market towns with a specialised marketing function, in Abingdon's case of corn and malt. Malt production undoubtedly proliferated in the north Berkshire countryside as well as in Abingdon, adding to the prosperity of agriculture in the region. Growing commercialisation was sustained by access to the London market.[60]

Much of the specialised local farming was in the hands of gentlemen, yeomen, husbandmen and labourers who did not have secondary urban occupations. The wills and inventories of local farmers around Abingdon show that they were comfortably off but had their capital tied up in their agricultural assets. Thomas North of Shippon, who died in 1558, left goods valued at £132 in his inventory. He lived simply but well, and his wealth was almost entirely represented by agricultural livestock and produce, ranging from 180 sheep and 12 milking cows to 48 cheeses on a rack and six dozen trenchers of garlic and onions.[61] He was prosperous compared with some other local farmers whose wills and inventories survive, but not exceptionally so. Inventories from the second half of the sixteenth century, such as that of William Bruckland of Northcourt, who had £47 worth of wheat, barley and

---

[60] M. Yates, 'Change and Continuities in Rural Society from the Later Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century: The Contribution of West Berkshire' (*Ec.HR*, New Series, 52:4, 1999), 624; Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', pp. 495-520; Tiller, 'Shopkeeping in 17th-century Oxfordshire', p. 275.

[61] BRO D/A1/66/166 (inventory of Thomas North, October 1558).

pulses in his barn, show a similar pattern of comfortable living and profitable husbandry.[62] John Hutt, a Shippon husbandman who died in 1587, had over £100 invested in crops, livestock and equipment, out of his inventory total of £122 10s.[63] The probate account of William Saunders, a yeoman of Shippon, gives an inventory total of over £400.[64]

The Amyce Survey, together with will and inventory evidence, shows that most townsmen had agricultural interests at a subsistence level. Leading townsmen could afford to diversify their businesses into commercial agriculture, like Richard Ely, a prime burgess who died in the epidemic of 1558, who was the proprietor of the Lamb in Ock Street. His inventory (totalling over £66) shows that he was living prosperously, with money invested in the inn and also in farming.[65] Available capital put together with entrepreneurial experience and contacts outside the area placed Abingdon's leading townsmen in a better position than local farmers to develop their agricultural investments. When the opportunity arose to switch capital from cloth or tanning into malt production and trading they took it.

Local malt production was already established by 1533-4, when the abbey spent £93 on malt, buying from seven local individuals (including 100 quarters from Audlett in lieu of £30 rent for Barton), and in Abingdon market.[66] The evidence suggests that there was a sharp increase in the second half of the sixteenth century in production that was concentrated in the town to supply increasing demand from other regions,

---

[62] BRO D/A1/175/59 (undated inventory of William Bruckland, buried 12 October, 1567). The inventory total is £80 8s.
[63] BRO D/A1/77/32 (inventory of John Hutt, 7 November, 1587).
[64] BRO D/A1/212/149 (probate account of William Saunders, 7 January 1591).
[65] BRO D/A1/188/6 (inventory of Richard Ely, 20 December 1558).
[66] BRO D/EP/7/33.

especially London. In 1570 John Edwards (described in his will as a labourer and in the parish register as a woodcleaver) left a will and inventory that used malt as an alternative currency. He was owed 40 quarters of malt worth £16 by seven local farmers, with over two-thirds of his total wealth invested in malt.[67] The first indication of investment in large-scale malt-making in Abingdon is in the 1570s, at which stage references to malt start to proliferate. A shoemaker's inventory in 1572 shows every indication of diversification into agriculture, with stocks of £26 worth of malt and no evidence of shoe-making, and a mercer's will in 1575 mentions a malthouse and a maltmaid.[68]

By 1585 a number of leading townsmen with a variety of primary business interests had diversified into malt production. That year the corporation tried to regulate malt sales, requiring that nine named men put three bushels of malt into the market every market day, and that all other inhabitants of the borough 'using the trade of malting' bring in two bushels every market day. None of them other than William Kisby, one of the town's two vintners, are known to have had any previous involvement in the malting trade.[69] Historians have recognised a general trend towards private marketing, and away from the traditional market place, caused partly by the development of longer-distance markets. One of the nine, Lionel Bostock, purchased 200 quarters of barley from William Harman of Langley, Buckinghamshire, for £70 in 1590.[70] Inventories confirm that large sums of money were involved in malt production. William Kisby had £44 worth of malt in his malting loft in 1588, and

---

[67] BRO D/A1/111/150 (will of John Edwards, 26 December 1569, inventory 31 July 1570).
[68] TNA PROB/11/57 (will of William Hill, 13 January 1575); BRO D/A1/103/212 (inventory of Michael Porter, 6 March 1572).
[69] Challenor, p. 128. The nine named men were William Braunche, Lionel Bostock, John Fisher, William Kisby, Antony Tesdale, Antony Bostock, William Blacknall, William Welling and Richard Bolt. They were all involved in town government.
[70] Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', p. 545; Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* p. 174.

Richard Tesdale had 50 quarters of malt valued at £100 in two lofts in 1597.[71] In 1590 a yeoman of Hanney, a village in the Vale of the White Horse, sued a yeoman of Abingdon over a delivery of malt.[72]

It was at this stage that the 'great trade' of malting started to have an impact on town life. It was blamed for the state of Abingdon's roads, due to the carriage of grain and of fuel for the malt kilns.[73] In 1597 Christ's Hospital minutes record a licence to Joan Ayers to grant two tenements to John Winsmore (a dyer) on condition that they were not turned into malting houses, or rooms, or used in any way other than for dwelling.[74] It was in the 1590s that the first references to maltmaking as a primary occupation are found, when a John Steed is described as maltster in the St. Helen's burial register in 1593, and the son of a well-off yeoman who died in 1596 is described as 'maltmaker'.[75] A brewery was redeveloped on the old abbey site, run by the vintners Kisby and Francis Little in the late 1500s and early 1600s.[76] Little recorded that he moved to Abingdon from Henley to follow the 'very gainful course' of malt-making, although he started out as a draper, and later became an inn-holder in what was a typically entrepreneurial business life for a leading townsman.[77].

Evidence about Abingdon's standard of living suggests an economic prosperity that brought relative improvements for most townsmen. The rising quality of domestic accommodation and possessions was first recorded by William Harrison in the 1570s

---

[71] BRO D/A1/200/52 (inventory of William Kisby, 24 May, 1588); BRO D/A1/126/186 (undated inventory of Richard Tesdale, died 20 May 1597).
[72] TNA C2/Eliz/B18/52.
[73] Townsend, *A History of Abingdon,* p. 156.
[74] CHA, Minutes f.53.
[75] BRO D/A1/206/90 (probate account of Richard Ockoulde, November 1596)
[76] Baker, *Historic Streets of Abingdon,* pp. 56-7.
[77] Hasler (ed.), *The House of Commons: 1558-1603*, I, 480; Liversidge and Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays,* p. 133.

and is confirmed by building accounts and inventories.[78] Overton's view is that gradual but important changes in consumption that can be identified in terms of imported goods and domestic comfort started in the 1550s, while Muldrew puts this even earlier in the 1530s.[79] By the 1580s William Luckins stocked a wide variety of goods in his mercer's shop for Abingdon consumers, including thirty-five primers and ABC books, 56 lb. currants, 10 lb. prunes, dates and white paper.[80] In terms of comfort, fashionable items, such as window glass, had already become relatively common in ordinary Abingdon households. Joan Steynberk, the widow of a foreign specialist smith who was established in Abingdon by the 1550s, had two glass windows in her house in the 1570s.[81] In 1572 the governors of the hospital paid 10s to mend 'divers glass windows of the almsfolk chambers'.[82] Mark Aldworth, a tanner who died in 1577, had glass in the windows of his hall and parlour, as well as a 'portal of carved wainscot', nine cushions and a 'drawing curtain with a rod of iron'.[83] His inventory total of just over £25 indicates a comfortable life style, but there is no evidence of business activity. In contrast a more prosperous vintner, Robert Stevenson, owned linen, clothes and plate appraised at over £30 in 1582.[84] The carpenter Ralph Hammond's inventory included the timber frame of part of a house ready to set up as well as 17 acres of arable land in crops. In his house he had luxury items such as a pair of playing tables, four pewter flower pots and two perfume pots.[85]

---

[78] Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* p. 140.
[79] Overton *et al*, *Production and Consumption,* p. 7; C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation,* (London, 1998), p. 3.
[80] BRO D/A1/92/60 (inventory of William Luckins, 23 March 1586).
[81] BRO D/A1/115/134 (inventory of Joan Steynberk, 1 April, 1577).
[82] CHA, Accounts, 1572.
[83] BRO D/A1/173/37 (inventory of Mark Aldworth, 23 October, 1577).
[84] BRO D/A1/115/190 (inventory of Robert Stevenson, 20 June 1582).
[85] BRO D/A1/77/66 (inventory of Raphe Hawmon, 1591).

Perhaps the more telling qualitative evidence for the town's prosperity is found in descriptions of the possessions of the less well-off, and there are indications here of a reasonable living standard. The estate of Thomas Clark, a glover, was valued at just over £6 and among his possessions were a feather bed, a nightgown for a man, a glass candlestick and a drinking glass.[86] Francis Nyckins, a shoemaker with a small-scale business, died in Abingdon in 1565. His estate was worth very little apart from shoes and leather valued at £5, but he owned several luxury items, including salt cellars, a pewter pot and three flower pots.[87] John Dorebar, a widower freemason, left possessions valued at less than £5, but lived in a degree of comfort although much of what he had was described as 'old'. [88] John Wilson, a bachelor tapster who died working at the Bear in 1586, had savings of over £10 and owned three doublets, one for work, one for best and a canvas doublet laid with green silk lace.[89]

In summary, townsmen were able to take advantage of traditional short- and long-distance trading patterns to grow and diversify their businesses, bringing more wealth into the town. The evidence indicates that economic stability underpinned steady economic growth in the town after the 1550s that benefited all levels of society.

Social Development

How did the town's flourishing economy affect its social development? Historians have identified a number of themes that were important to social change in Elizabethan towns. The expansion of formalised, hierarchical and oligarchic civic rule is thought to have worked together with increasing problems with poverty to

---

[86] BRO D/A1/181/51 (inventory of Thomas Clark, 11 August 1564). Drinking glasses did not become common items for another 100 years, according to Overton *et al*, *Production and Consumption*, p. 105.
[87] TNA E/199/37/22.
[88] BRO D/AS1/61/1549 (inventory of John Dorebar, 12 September 1586).
[89] BRO D/A1/133093a (account of John Wilson, 30 May 1586).

polarise town society. We have seen that many townspeople experienced improvements in their general living standards, and need to ask whether this changed other aspects of their way of life. These ideas provide a context for questions about changes in the social and cultural life of Abingdon after the 1550s.

In order to discuss the town's social structure we need to be reminded that in pre-reformation Abingdon the economic status of townsmen had largely determined the town's social structure. At the top of the scale were better-off tradesmen and merchants, some of whom had joined a very few minor gentry families in an informal and partial town government through the fraternity. A large and reasonably affluent middling group contributed to a lively urban economy, and offered employment to wage earners, while at the bottom end of the scale were the unemployed and the poor. By the end of the dissolution period the private acquisition of town property by better-off individuals had widened the gap between the elite and ordinary townsmen. In the light of the stability of the town's occupational structure during the period is it likely that there were significant changes at the top end of the social structure after the 1550s?

We have seen that, while the formalisation of town government might in theory have widened leadership, in practice the twenty-two principal offices (principal burgesses and hospital governors) that replaced the twelve available before the reformation (fraternity masters) were monopolised by a small number of families, mostly those that had already been important before the dissolution period. Who were they? Wealthy businessmen were usually the only people who could afford to be involved in civic administration, but it was typical of many towns that not all of them

participated. In Gloucester, for example, 15 out of the 20 wealthiest inhabitants in the 1590s were in town government. In Worcester in the 1550s 49 out of the 71 richest citizens were in the ruling groups of the Twenty-four or the Forty-eight.[90] In Abingdon in 1560 five out of the seven wealthiest townsmen (according to subsidy assessment) were both borough and hospital office-holders, and the other two later took on different offices.[91] They were (in order) Oliver Hyde, gentleman and Abingdon's first M.P., who paid on lands; Thomas Tonks, chandler; Humphrey Bostock, draper; James Fisher, grocer/mercer; Richard Mayott, draper; John Goodwin, ironmonger; William Symkyns, tanner. We cannot assume that taking part in town government was the only qualification to be an important citizen, or indeed that everyone was prepared to give up time and money in exchange for influence and status. In any event Abingdon's thriving business life meant that there continued to be a larger group of well-off townsmen than could be accommodated in the ranks of a governing elite. It has already been pointed out that some men made faster progress in town government than others, and that some of the most prosperous townsmen never progressed as far as or beyond secondary burgess-ship. The records that are available are no help in understanding levels of participation, and it is possible that some men took on roles in the town, particularly in the two churches, that we know nothing about.

Table 9 (p. 259) lists Abingdon inventories totalling £50 and over between 1550-1600 and indicates with the addition of an asterix those individuals who are known to have been involved in town government. This analysis is obviously in no way comprehensive, due to the unreliability of inventory survival, compilation and

---

[90] Clark,'The Ramoth-Gilead of the Good', p. 259; A. Dyer, *City of Worcester*, p. 224.
[91] TNA E179/74/216.

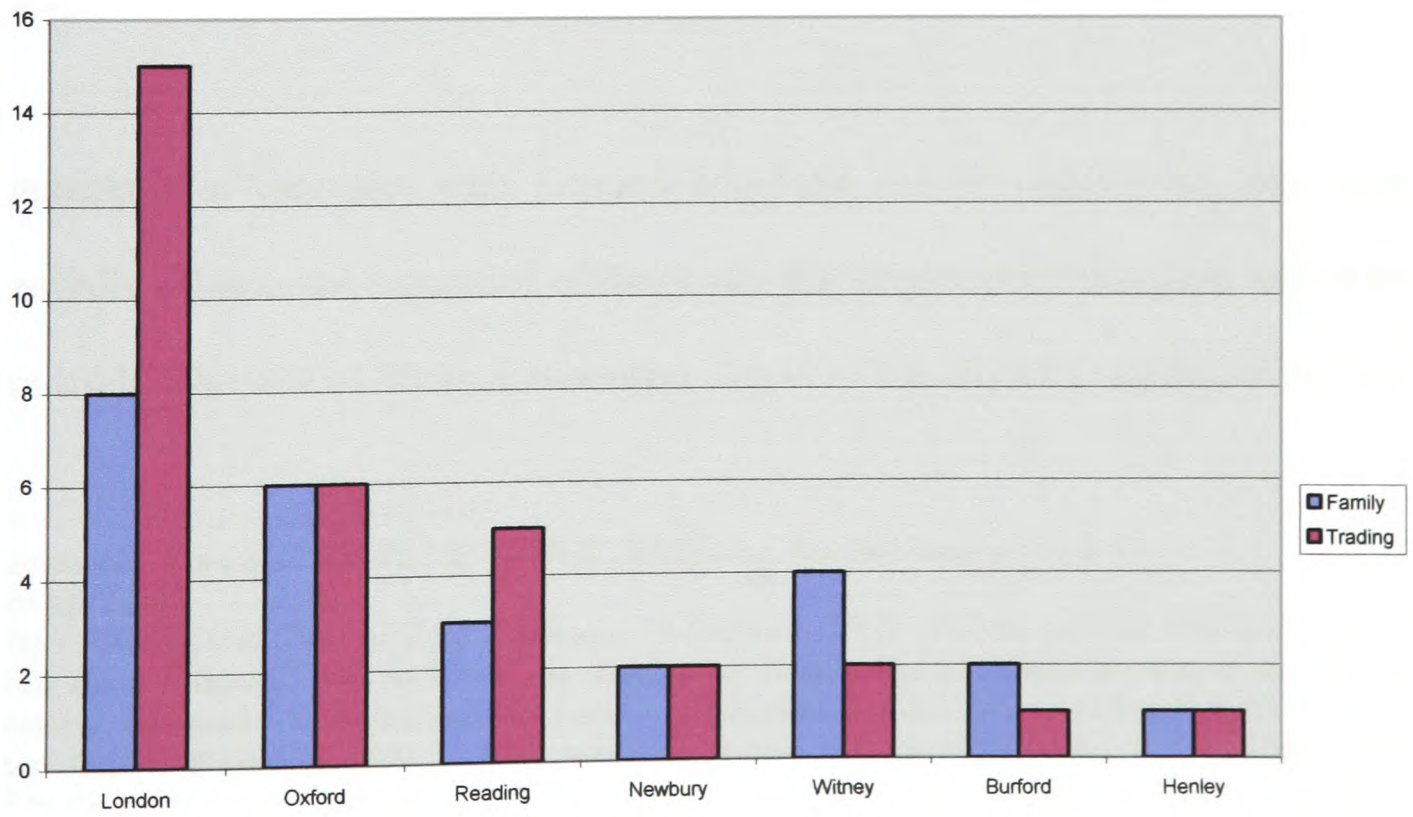
presentation. Some of the townspeople in this sample could never have taken office, because they died prematurely or in one case were female. But some important features about the higher echelons of Abingdon society can be drawn from this table. As we have already noted, drapers were the most likely men to take office, and those men involved in agriculture as their main or only job were not particularly likely to be involved in town affairs. Some other occupations offered a pathway into the governing elite. Two of Abingdon's three sixteenth-century vintners are represented here, and all three took high office. There were mercers, chandlers and grocers other than the men shown here who were involved in town government. In contrast, only one tanner (William Symkyns), whose inventory is included in the table, became a high burgess and a hospital governor during the sixteenth century, despite the town's flourishing tanning trade. Another wealthy townsman who did not take office either in the borough or the hospital was the carpenter, Ralph Hammond, whose inventory total is also shown.[92] We can conclude that wealth was not the only qualifying factor and that there continued to be a large number of prosperous individuals in Abingdon who were not part of the governing elite. We cannot be sure of the relative importance of status gained through government, occupation or wealth. It seems feasible that a degree of class separation between those who achieved office and those who did not dated back to the pre-reformation town. Distributive traders in particular ran much more complex businesses than a carpenter or a tanner. It is likely that the qualification to enter the governing elite was not only to do with wealth or social or even occupational status as such, but was also strongly allied to entrepreneurial skills and experience gained from contacts and negotiations in the world outside the Abingdon area. In other words, it was the relative sophistication of their business and

[92] BRO D/A1/77/67 (inventory of Raphe Hawmon, probate granted 21 July 1591).

social experience that put townsmen into leadership. This explains why some incomers, like Francis Little, progressed so quickly up the administrative ladder. This was a factor that over time, as men who held office gained experience in the demands of effective town government, may increasingly have set Abingdon's leaders apart from their equally prosperous peers.

One distinctive feature about the town's leading families was the contacts with London that, again, were identified in the pre-reformation town's trading and kinship connections. The figure below shows a comparison between kinship connections and trading contacts with other towns and cities. This demonstrates the importance of London in comparison to other towns, and also underlines the long-standing synchronicity between occupational and social structure that has already been noted.

Fig. 13: Abingdon families and their connections with other urban centres: a comparison between known family connections and known trading connections 1530-1610



Fifteen leading Abingdon families are known to have had direct business contacts with London, and we know of eight families that had family in the capital. London's domination of internal and external trade created a 'magnetism' that drew in migrants from all over England: in the early 1550s less than 20% of London's new freemen originated from the metropolitan area itself.[93] Commercial contacts were obviously useful in placing apprentices, and we have seen evidence of long-standing trading connections between Abingdon and London.[94] The town's leading men continued to invest in apprenticeships for their children in London. Thomas Orpwood left his grandson, Robert, £100 when he died in 1580, and he became established as a citizen and goldsmith of London.[95] John Francis, member of a long-standing Abingdon family of pewterers, apprenticed three younger sons in London, and by the time of his death in 1618 two of them were already citizens.[96] Kitch noted a special link between London and those towns on the Thames (including Abingdon) that sent consistently and unexpectedly large numbers of apprentices to London in the seventeenth century.[97]

Connections of any sort with London could be socially significant, and could potentially enhance the reputation of the family that remained in Abingdon, and of the town itself. The will of Thomas Braunche, draper of the city of London, dated 1565,

---

[93] Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* pp. 76ff.; Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* p. 98.
[94] See pp. 68-9.
[95] TNA PROB/11/90 (will of Paul Orpwood, 30 October 1597). Robert married into the upwardly mobile Herrick family. His wife was the daughter of Robert Herrick, sometime mayor and MP for Leicester. Her uncles were well-known London goldsmiths, and her cousin Robert Herrick the poet. Robert Orpwood died in 1609, and his successful career was commemorated in Abingdon by the presentation (by his brother) of a portrait to Christ's Hospital. Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* p.38; H. Clifford, 'Herrick, Nicholas (1542–1592)', *ODNB*, online edn, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/54563, accessed 2 June 2010]
[96] BRO D/A1/189/164 (account of John Francis, 12 June 1618) transcribed in *Berkshire Probate Accounts 1583-1712,* ed. I. Mortimer, pp. 101f.
[97] M.J. Kitch, 'Capital and kingdom: migration to later Stuart London' in Beier and Finlay, *London 1500-1700* (London, 1986), p. 238.

epitomises all the advantages that could be gained by Abingdon through the maintenance of social connections. His will shows his enthusiasm for his hometown, his family, his friends and fellow drapers, and for the protestant faith. He owned a house in Abingdon which he left to his brother, William. He left £140 to be shared among William's children, as well as smaller amounts to his Bostock cousins. He also left £6 to the poor of Abingdon: 20d each to the 60 poorest and 12d to 20 others, at the discretion of his brother and 'two other substantial dwellers'. His legacy thus enhanced the wealth, status and reputation of his family in the provinces, and brought money into the town.[98] Networks of relatives and friends in London are known to have helped to maintain contacts with their original towns and villages.[99] Thomas Braunche witnessed the indentures for Abingdon's new school in 1563, and may have acted on the town's behalf to encourage John Roysse, another Abingdon native who had become a London mercer, to make the endowment.[100] Roysse does not appear to have had any family left in the town, and Braunche's intervention may have been crucial. Roysse was clearly a traditionalist who associated charity with a heavenly reward.[101] His ordinances for the school asked for prayers three times a day to end with the words 'the blessed trinity have mercy upon our founder John Roysse and all Christian people'. One of the many rings he had ordered, to be inscribed with a similar invocation, was for Thomas Orpwood, the current mayor. Roysse laid out £50 for his funeral in Abingdon, which included paying for the travel of mourners from

---

[98] TNA PROB 11/48 (will of Thomas Branche, 20 October 1565).
[99] Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* pp. 80f.
[100] Preston, *St. Nicholas,* p. 308.
[101] I.W. Archer, 'The arts and acts of memorialization in early modern London' in J. Merritt, *Imagining Early London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 89-116; S. Brigden, 'Religion and Social obligation in early sixteenth century London', *Past & Present,* 103 (1984), 106.

London.[102] The mixed motivation of charitable piety and self-memorialisation behind Braunche's and Roysse's gifts was very welcome to the Abingdon elite.

Contacts with local towns as shown in Fig. 13 were sometimes at a lower social and business level, such as when the shoemaker Richard Bide from Gloucestershire arrived to marry Joan Wright, widow of an Abingdon shoemaker, in the 1560s. However, better-off Abingdon townsmen and women often looked to other local towns for marriage prospects. William Mathew, mercer, one of the first mayors of Abingdon, moved to Oxford in 1558 in order to marry Mrs. Mary Bridgeman, the wealthy widow of a mercer, and sister of Sir Thomas White.[103] Richard Mayott's daughter Alice married Thomas Smith, brewer and alderman of Oxford, in 1583; her son and grandson were both mayors of Oxford in the 1600s.[104] The daughter of Thomas Powis, an Abingdon burgess, married Robert Hovenden, the warden of All Souls, and her sister married his brother.[105] The girls' brother, also Thomas, became a student at All Souls' in 1581. William Welling, a well-to-do saddler, married the heiress of a Reading yeoman in 1561, Humphrey Jackson. Jackson was mayor of Reading in 1568, and later retired to live with his daughter in Abingdon. When he died in 1578 he left all his property to his daughter and grandsons, including £120 to the eldest (his namesake) apart from £6 to his cousin in London.[106] Alliances between urban trading families brought indirect financial benefits to Abingdon, and also added to the reputation and prestige of the leading families of the new borough. Two

---

[102] Preston, *St. Nicholas*, pp. 310-12, 387.
[103] Mathew was mayor of Oxford in 1564.
[104] Oxford History: Mayors of Oxford [http://www.headington.org.uk/oxon/mayors/1485_1603/smith_thomas1_1585_1600.htm (accessed 2 April, 2010)].
[105] E. Baigent, 'Hovenden, Robert (1544–1614)', *ODNB*, Oxford Univ. Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/13881, accessed 7 June 2010]
[106] TNA PROB 11/63 (will of Humphrey Jackson, 2 May 1581).

brothers from a prominent Witney family, Thomas and Richard Clempson, set up business in Abingdon as mercers in the late 1500s, and both subsequently married daughters of William Lee, an important townsman.

To summarise, we have to conclude that while entry into the ruling elite was restricted in the years after incorporation, this was nothing new to Abingdon. But it does seem possible that the institutionalisation of oligarchic leadership and the new opportunities that it opened up for some townsmen gradually caused a greater polarisation between the ruling elite and the rest of the townspeople. This was not simply due to the status of office itself, although the mayoral office in particular offered social as well as political status.[107] A combination of less tangible factors such as contacts with lawyers, local gentry and administrators in central government and other towns inevitably broadened the outlook of the town's new governing class, and set men whose business abilities had already qualified them for leadership further apart from their fellows.

The other factor in the polarisation that some historians have identified in the early modern town's social structure is an increasing problem with poverty, and it is necessary to ask whether there is any indication of this in Abingdon.[108] Historians have questioned Hoskins' estimate that a third of the population of a typical sixteenth century town was destitute. Slack's conclusion from a survey of urban censuses of the poor between 1557 and 1635 led him to conclude that 5% of the urban population was normally poor. Rappaport found that in London the typical proportion of the

---

[107] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 240-1.
[108] The historiography of this argument is summarised in Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* pp. 162ff.

urban community that needed regular support was between 5% and 10%.[109] In Abingdon there were 31 rooms available that could accommodate a minimum of 40 people, and that was probably sufficient to help most of the older population throughout the period. But once the population started to rise towards 2000 in the 1570s, the existing institutional arrangements became inadequate, and both the hospital and the borough had to develop different strategies to provide for the growing number of poor people.

This does not necessarily mean that the number of poor people in the town increased disproportionately. But because no new institutional accommodation was provided in the sixteenth century, the problem of poverty had to be addressed in new ways which the town's economy seems to have been able to support.[110] Personal charity augmented institutional support of the poor, and there are some indications of levels of giving. The administration account of a wealthy yeoman describes gifts of 20s to the poor at his burial and 40s at Christmas as 'normal expenses'.[111] Thomas Gallant, innholder at the Bear, made generous bequests to his servants, including 10s and a petticoat to the 'poor wench in my house'.[112] The wills of less well-off townsmen generally make no charitable provisions, other than a customary 2d or 4d to the diocese of Salisbury. Begging was obviously discouraged in the town, because when the Earl of Leicester travelled through the town money was disbursed directly to poor people at the bridge over the Thames and at the 'town's end', but 20s was given to a leading townsman 'to give to the poor'.[113] There is no documentary evidence that

---

[109] Slack, *Poverty and Policy,* pp. 67ff.; Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* p. 170.
[110] See pp. 226ff.
[111] BRO D/A1/212/149 (administration of William Saunders of Shippon, 7 January 1591).
[112] TNA PROB/11/89 (will of Thomas Gallant, 24 January 1597).
[113] *Household Accounts and Disbursement Books of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester*, ed. S. Adams, (Camden Soc., 5th Series, 6, 1995), 189, 289.

indicates particular problems caused by distant travelling poor people coming through the town. In the 63 years between 1538 and 1600 fifty-eight burials of strangers and visitors are recorded in the St. Helen's register, but only a few of these are described as poor or beggars. It seems likely that the agricultural prosperity of north Berkshire protected Abingdon in at least two different ways from some of the problems that other towns had to cope with. Abingdon probably did not experience an influx of rural poor, and towns in corn growing areas tended to suffer less from grain shortages at times of dearth.[114]

It has been suggested that another 15% or 20% of the population in every community lived close to the poverty line, usually self-supporting but particularly vulnerable in difficult times of illness or high prices or unemployment. Wage rates lagged behind price inflation, and by the 1570s only recovered 80% of their real value before the drastic price inflation of the 1540s and 1550s.[115] The wages paid to building workers that are occasionally detailed in the borough chamberlain's accounts did not change significantly between the end of the 1550s and the 1580s, but on the other hand the corporation's property improvements kept skilled and unskilled labourers in work.[116] It is almost impossible to assess how many people did 'straddle the poverty line', particularly because we know so little about the town's population of wage labourers who were live-in servants, lodgers or sub-tenants. In London it has been estimated that the majority of journeymen could save enough money within a few years to become householders and set up in business.[117] Richard Goswell, a journeyman from Newbury, was lodging with an Abingdon smith and working for a pewterer when he

---

[114] Slack, *Poverty and Policy,* p. 146.
[115] Slack, *Poverty and Policy,* p. 73; Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities,* pp. 146f.
[116] They were presumably regulated by the town council in accordance with the 1563 Statute of Artificers. For trends in London wages see Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds,* pp. 145ff.
[117] Ibid., pp. 170-1.

died. At his death he was worth over £14, mostly in cash.[118] Another young man, a tapster at the Bear, had £12 in cash, mainly in the hands of his current and previous masters.[119] But of course some wage earners had very little. Joan Persevall, a servant, had almost nothing apart from her clothing - two spoons, a tin cup and a goose.[120] Women had limited earning opportunities but work was available for spinners and knitters. Unnamed women were paid for caring for a couple suspected of having the plague and being kept in isolation.[121] Helen Prince was a single woman whose progression into poverty is discernible. She was living in one of the rooms at the former St. John's almshouse in 1560, and although she initially paid 5s p.a. rent she became semi-dependent on institutional assistance. She was paid 2d in 1566 for cleaning the tavern (cellar) under the new market house. She was poor enough to be excused rent by the corporation in the 1570s, and was buried in 1583.[122]

The great majority of Abingdon's ordinary householders, minor craftsmen and wage labourers at the lower end of the social scale, paid their rent and never got into serious arrears. Rents owed to the hospital between 1553 and 1580 rarely totalled more than £2 p.a., (less than 3% of rents receivable) and were paid in full within two years. Arrears owed to the chamberlain in the same period could be more substantial, probably as a result of the proportion of poorer housing owned by the corporation, and the policy of allowing poor tenants to remain in their houses rent-free. Rental income in arrears as a proportion of rental income receivable by the chamberlain between 1560 and 1580 averaged just below 8%. This percentage includes men and women who could afford to pay (and often did so in their own time) as well as those

---

[118] BRO D/A1/71/62 (will of Richard Goswell, 11 October 1582).
[119] BRO D/A1/133/93 (administration of John Wilson, 30 May 1586).
[120] BRO D/A1/207/70 (inventory of Joan Persevall, 14 January 1573).
[121] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, Vol. II, f.85v. (1583).
[122] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, Vol. I, f.87d. (1566). See also p. 128.

who could not. Townspeople who paid rents 'at will' were fortunate to be protected from inflation because their customary rents were not subject to increase. In conclusion, there is no empirical evidence of an increasing poverty problem in the town after the 1550s that went beyond the pressures of increasing population. It is possible that the benefits of prosperity in the town filtered down through the social strata. Employment opportunities and generally improved living standards, for example, protected rather than polarised the pre-reformation status quo of town society.

Conclusion

We have seen that, while Abingdon's social structure continued to be largely based on economic status, institutional developments gave leading families in the town the opportunity to formalise and solidify their position at the top of the social scale. Institutionally as well as socially and economically Abingdon was deeply rooted in its past. The men in charge of the fraternity had acquired a social status that was not just economic. There were similar numbers involved in post-reformation government, and some of them were the same people. Did they, as has been suggested, become progressively more set apart from other better-off townsmen? It has already been pointed out that the dissolution process, and in particular the disappearance of the monastery, left an 'empty space' in the community that was related to identity and prestige.[123] The new secular focus of town life conferred social prestige on leading families that related to the image and status of the newly incorporated institutions. But I would suggest this was closely related to the status that was already attached to certain families and occupations. Moreover the growing reputation of these families

---

[123] See pp. 213-4.

was as much allied to economic and social opportunities relating to business and kinship as well as to the opportunities of office.

It is clear that Abingdon's development owed as much to economic expansion and social stability as it did to incorporated government. In this sense Christopher Dyer's suggestion that small towns did not need incorporation in order to function well holds good. In some towns trusts operated as effective governing institutions. Bicester in Oxfordshire was one such community, where a contemporary opinion was that the town was 'the richer thereby' for having no corporation.[124] But not every town had experienced organisational uncertainty to the same degree as Abingdon. The symbiotic relationship between economic, social and governmental factors was closely related to the restoration of the town's image and the interests of the town's leading men. With new formal powers they could promote the town's interests in the outside world and safeguard control and stability in the town through measures that included improvements in welfare, housing and facilities. It seems unlikely that economic reasons alone would have attracted leading men to stay in or come to the town. The life of the town was enhanced by men like the upwardly mobile miller William Blacknall, who first came to the town because of the opportunity to develop the old abbey site, and became part of the governing establishment, and Oliver Hyde, the local gentleman who became Mason's deputy at Christ's Hospital and the first MP, and Francis Little and Thomas Braunche, the first townsmen to represent the borough in parliament. There is no real evidence of the intensification of oligarchic rule in the early years of incorporation, but we can agree with Tittler that, in the case of Abingdon, incorporation supported and strengthened its economy and society.

---

[124] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, pp.82ff., *VCH, Oxon*, VI, 37.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

We have seen that a favourable conjunction of circumstances protected Abingdon from the worst effects of reformation change. A stable core of entrepreneurial families operating within a lively society and economy retained the authority to foster political stabilisation. The status of the first generation of leaders of the incorporated town was linked as much to their roles in the pre-reformation society and economy as it was to the new offices they held. New administrative, social and economic opportunities in the 1550s had progressively set them further apart from their fellow townsmen, a trend that was reinforced by the oligarchic nature of the two institutions that governed the town. The available evidence for the early years of autonomous institutional government reveals a competently led community that managed social and economic change in such a way as 'to make a silk purse out of the sow's ear of dissolution'.[1]

However, towards the end of the sixteenth century there were new challenges to the town's stability. There is evidence of the growth of dissent among the elite and of the imposition of political, social and cultural restrictive measures that took place against a background of the advance of puritan ideas. There is only space here to engage with the effects of these factors on the community to a limited degree. But it is important to our understanding of the apparently harmonious progress of the first decades of incorporated government to enquire about the longer-term success of Abingdon's restructuring.

---

[1] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 50.

Conflict among civic leaders was common in late sixteenth century towns, and in Tittler's view was connected with issues about political jurisdiction and in particular opposition to a narrowing of public participation. That protestant ideology had a role in many such conflicts has been generally acknowledged, but others have concluded that divisions in towns such as Totnes, Winchester, Thetford and Ludlow were often based on material issues. Penry Williams thought that much of the trouble between groups of better-off men in Ludlow was personal, arising from a culture where corporation properties were viewed as 'a means of rewarding and succouring its burgesses' and which made discontent inevitable. Craig found that tensions between urban factions in Thetford arose from grudges about the use of power, and that dissension in the town of Bury St. Edmunds had a partly political basis, although the divisions there were between conservatives and puritans. There were similar ambiguities in the dissent that arose in Abingdon.[2]

Conflict among Abingdon's civic elite seems to have started when the first generation to take office in the town began to die, and the united sense of purpose that those men apparently shared for the community became eroded. There is no evidence of disagreement among the town's leadership until a new generation started to gain influence in the 1580s and 1590s. Younger members of the Mayott, Fisher, Bostock, Orpwood and Tesdale families were joined in office by newcomers to the town, and rifts and rivalries become evident in the records of the corporation and of Christ's Hospital. What is not clear is whether trouble was caused through jealousy between individuals who felt others were gaining power and influence at their expense, or whether there was any significant misappropriation, corruption or neglect of due

[2] Tittler, ibid., pp. 188ff; P. Williams, 'Government and Politics in Ludlow 1590-1642', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society,* 56 (1961), 282-94; Craig, *Reformation, Politics and Polemics,* pp. 64ff.

process in Abingdon's governing bodies. At Christ's Hospital Antony Bostock, elected governor in 1582, was ejected, despite furious protests from his adherents, for his 'unquiet' behaviour. Much of the dispute was caused by jealousy about leases, and Bostock's main opponent, John Fisher, was admonished in 1598 for factious behaviour that, it was alleged, included usurping the office of master and stealing counterparts of leases.[3]

The dispute spread to the town council, where in 1592 a new decree was made that 'the Common Council shall quietly behave themselves and not use any loud speeches'.[4] In 1599 John Winsmore, a governor of Christ's Hospital and a secondary burgess, was suspended for joining himself with 'factious and troublesome persons'. John Fisher had been accused previously of getting Winsmore elected as a Christ's Hospital governor. Winsmore confessed that he had

> put his hand to a late petition exhibited to the Lords of the Council against the Mayor, Bailiffs and principal Burgesses, and against the Master and Governors of the Hospital ... to prevent the obtaining of a new charter ... [asserting] that the Mayor and Masters of the town do put the revenues and profits of the Corporation into their own purses and ... have greatly oppressed the inhabitants by racking of rents and other taxations.[5]

Although it is difficult to judge the rights or wrongs of these disputes, it is not surprising that members of the town's leadership came under suspicion of corruption. The town's leaders had too much at stake in terms of their financial interest in business and property to escape jealous accusations that their actions were guided by self-interest. Antony Bostock's complaint against the governors that they had bought a house for £100 and were receiving only 30s p.a. rent for it from a member of the

---

[3] CHA, Minutes f.22v-24; 37v-38.
[4] Challenor, 1592, p. 130.
[5] Challenor, 1599, pp. 131f.

town's elite was true.[6] Moreover, it is not clear how much was spent on building a new house for Richard Mayott, for which he paid 36s 8d p.a.[7] However these are the only leases made to the elite on favourable terms that can be identified from either the hospital accounts or the Mayor's Book of leases. Neither is there any evidence of rack renting or anything else that suggests that there was a 'culture of corruption' in the town.[8] Abingdon's leadership was effective enough to receive support from central government. The gentlemen (led by the Vice Chancellor of Oxford University) appointed by the Lord Keeper of the Seal in 1598 at the request of the master of Christ's Hospital to examine its statutes supported the status quo and did not take John Fisher's part.[9]

It is not clear what was really at issue in the factional disputes at the end of the sixteenth century in Abingdon. The cause may have been what Tittler identifies as the tendency for the 'consolidation of newly won political and constitutional authority' to lead to a 'narrowing of the political process and a move to a more elitist approach'.[10] It is fair to say that the order in council made in 1591 that newly elected bailiffs enter into bonds of obligation in the sum of £200 would have excluded most townsmen, and may have been intended to prevent some secondary burgesses from taking office as principal burgesses.[11] Winsmore's claim in 1599 that he feared a proposed new charter might give authority to 'restrain foreigners and to do other things hurtful to the corporation' might indicate that as a newcomer to the town he

---

[6] CHA, Accounts, 1576.
[7] CHA, Accounts, 1575, see p. 224.
[8] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 186ff.
[9] CHA, Minutes, f.38.
[10] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 139.
[11] Challenor, p. 129.

was concerned that the corporation was restricting access to freemanship.[12] It is not known whether the dissent in Abingdon escalated into factionalism or involved any element of popular protest as in other towns like Ludlow or Totnes.

However, the Fisher-Winsmore party was correct if it was claiming that the corporation intended to restrict popular participation.[13] An act of the town's council dated 1604 amended the charter provisions for the election of the mayor and the bailiffs by ordaining a named electoral body of 105 men. The act provides for the body to be made up of principal and secondary burgesses as well as 'forty persons or more at their pleasure of the gravest, wisest and most sufficient men ... other burgesses and men of the lower sort'. The reason given for the exclusion of many of the potwallopers from their already limited role in the democratic process is the past behaviour of 'disordered persons' meeting in 'mutinous tumults' to elect 'such as were not fit'.[14] It is not known whether this measure was successfully enacted and, although it does not sound particularly restrictive, it proposed to exclude about 250 householders who were accustomed to participate in elections in favour of a smaller more acceptable group of the 'middling sort'.[15] A possible reaction to this was recorded in a minute of the same year, when 'William Carter, an inhabitant of this borough, ... being in the Council House was required for the sum of forty shillings to be a freeman of the same, who utterly refused the same'.[16] However, the relative position of freemen, burgesses (who were not principal or secondary burgesses), inhabitants, townsmen and inhabitants of the lower sort and the distinctions between

---

[12] Challenor, p. 131.
[13] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 189ff; Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth,* pp. 94ff.
[14] Challenor, Appendix, X-XII.
[15] The Amyce Survey lists about 350 dwellings in the mid-1550s.
[16] Challenor, p. 133.

these categories are not made clear either in the charter or in the 1604 act. The borough received two new charters in the early 1600s in which no changes were made to electoral procedures.[17] Meanwhile the disputes between the elite families 'rumbled on for decades'.[18]

The Fisher-Winsmore party may have been seeking popular support in the town, but rivalry between different members of the elite over the perquisites and pickings of local office was as much at the root of dissent in Abingdon as an argument over the rights of ordinary townsmen. Worcester was a larger town also ruled by a 'small group of pre-eminently rich men, closely knit, but open to fresh blood', with an upper body of the Twentyfour and a secondary group of the Fortyeight. Alan Dyer speculates that Worcester's leading group was 'too fluid to harden into a caste' that might 'drift into petty self-interest'.[19] Abingdon's smaller and stable clique of ruling families was initially a meritocracy that served the town well. But although, as Dyer says, real ability can often be found in those who inherited wealth and status, there are signs of developing self-interest and exclusivity in younger generations of leading families. An extreme example was a third generation Bostock hospital governor elected in the early 1600s, William the eldest son of Lionel, who proved an unfortunate choice when he was found to have embezzled bequests to the hospital.[20] The potential for factious and inadequate leadership to damage good government and harmonious society was obviously great. However there may have only been a few guilty members of the ruling elite. We have already seen that able newcomers entered town government who may have mitigated the effects of disagreements in the council

---

[17] Challenor, pp. 42ff. These confirmed grants of property and markets, and allowed for the appointment of a recorder and JPs.
[18] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters in early modern Berkshire', pp. 72ff.
[19] A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester,* p. 226.
[20] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 37-8.

chamber and the hospital and ensured administrative effectiveness. On the other hand newcomers like Winsmore may have felt that the traditional elite families had taken too much advantage from the offices they held. We lack the necessary evidence to know whether the development of government in Abingdon was generally consensual. It is possible that the disagreements outlined above were largely confined to the elite and due to jealous clashes between strong personalities. Christopher Dyer points out that urban society was rarely 'excessively harmonious', and in his investigation of serious factional struggles in Shipston-on-Stour he puts forward a realistic view that social cohesion was often a matter of 'papering over the cracks'.[21]

It remains to ask whether Abingdon's steady move towards puritanism unsettled the stability of late Elizabethan Abingdon. In Tewkesbury the early unity among civic leaders had ended quickly due to religious divisions between progressives and traditionalists in the early years of Elizabeth's reign.[22] Factional town politics 'often ran along religious fault-lines' according to Collinson and Craig, although problems tended to be triggered by competition over material resources.[23] In Bury St. Edmunds there were clashes between a religiously conservative elite that had been allied to the former administration and a protestant 'middling sort'.[24] However, in Abingdon the introduction of new religious ideas gathered pace without any known opposition after 1558.[25] In 1577 a weekly Thursday lecture was established, and the first lecturer was Lawrence Humphrey, President of Magdalen College, a Zurich Marian exile and an

---

[21] C. Dyer, 'Small-town conflict in the later Middle Ages', pp. 183-4.
[22] Litzenberger, 'The coming of Protestantism to Elizabethan Tewkesbury', pp. 79f.
[23] Collinson and Craig, (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns,* p. 4; D. Lamburn, 'Politics and Religion in Early Modern Beverley', in ibid, pp. 63-78.
[24] Craig, *Reformation, Politics and Polemics,* pp. 64ff.
[25] See pp. 212-3.

important member of the Oxford protestant establishment.[26] Civic lectureships were already an established way of providing preaching from leading evangelicals in towns. Colchester funded its own town preacher through local collections in 1564.[27] By the 1580s Abingdon was providing the venue for the 'aggressively protestant' preaching of John Prime 'every other week'.[28] He received a University preaching licence in 1581, but may have preached in Abingdon in 1579 or 1580, when the chamberlain's accounts refer to a payment of 40s to 'Mr. Raynolds and Mr. Prynn for reading the lecture'.[29] John Rainolds was Fellow and later President of Corpus Christi, by 1580 he was a well-known lecturer and 'in the forefront of the puritan party'.[30] Robert Abbot, (later Master of Balliol and Bishop of Salisbury) also preached at Abingdon after he received his preaching licence in 1587: as a popular calvinist preacher he is said to have 'thronged auditories at Oxford, Abingdon, Worcester etc'.[31]

The weekly Thursday lecture was funded by one of Abingdon's leading men, Lionel Bostock, jointly with a local gentleman, Thomas Denton's stepson Sir John Fettiplace. In the 1570s two new annual lectures were funded through other bequests. It is clear that there was general protestant enthusiasm among the town's elite, and religious change was not a focus for disagreement between Abingdon's elite families in the

---

[26] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters', pp. 69-70.
[27] Haigh, *English Reformations,* pp. 273ff.
[28] J. Lock, 'Prime, John (1549/50–1596)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22792, accessed 26 March 2007]. Prime's book on Galatians, published in 1587, was dedicated to the Bishop of Salisbury, John Piers, and is supposed to be based on a series of sermons preached in Abingdon.
[29] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, f.173d. 40s would presumably have paid for a series of sermons.
[30] M. Feingold, 'Rainolds , John (1549–1607)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2006 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23029, accessed 26 March 2007]. John Rainolds was probably a contemporary of Williams' at Oxford: he graduated as MA in 1572 and was licensed to preach in 1576.
[31] J. Lock, 'Abbot, Robert (1559/60–1618)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8, accessed 26 March 2007].

sixteenth century.[32] The policies of the town council reveal a growing integration between government and religious practice: this typified the 'alliance of magistrates and ministers' that consolidated the reformation in many towns.[33] The first evidence of this is found in the appointment of the town schoolmaster, which was in the hands of the mayor and principal burgesses, as set out in Roysse's 'Laws and Ordinances'.[34] Richard Williams, an Oxford graduate appointed in 1577, was in post for only one year before his death. His will and inventory contain a list of books that clearly indicate a private interest in protestant ideology.[35] It seems likely that he was recruited for his protestant views in the same year as the inauguration of the Thursday lectures. His status in the town is confirmed by the inclusion of prominent local men as witnesses to his will: Mr Lionel Bostock the mayor and William Merricke bachelor of law (and son-in-law of the retired town clerk). Robert Holland, the vicar of St. Helen's, helped take the inventory.[36] In 1585 the corporation made ordinances to ensure that a significant proportion of townspeople received 'a full indoctrination in the prevalent religious ideologies'.[37] Every household had to send at least one representative to each of the Thursday lectures, and two if there were more than four persons in the house, on pain of a fine. Burgesses were ordered to 'attend upon the mayor ... unto the church and so home again'. This rule at first applied to certain church festivals, but in 1591 was extended to all Sundays, public sermons and lecture

---

[32] In the 1620s the arrival of a 'fanatically puritan' vicar at St. Helen's coincided with the development of St. Nicholas' church as a base for those in the town who rejected puritan ideas. Brod 'Dissent and Dissenters in early modern Berkshire', pp. 74ff.
[33] Collinson and Craig, (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns,* p. 10.
[34] Preston, *St Nicholas,* p. 386.
[35] The books include Bishop Jewel's *Apology,* and commentaries by Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli and Gualter.
[36] BRO D/A1/133/10 (will of Richard Williams, dated 8 July 1578, inventory taken 17 July, 1578).
[37] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters in early modern Berkshire', pp. 70-1. Brod points out that Prime's lectures were probably intellectually well over the head of the average townsman.

days.[38] By 1604 an act made in 1557 to forbid trading during the Sunday service had been amended in order to ban all Sunday trading.[39]

These sorts of measures were typical of many towns, and historians have grouped them together under a general heading of 'godly rule'. The encouragement of discipline and order suited the governors of towns, and it is difficult to know whether the advance of puritanism created a demand for civil discipline or was a useful tool in its support. The social harmony and order that some historians have claimed had disappeared with the destruction of the ritual and ceremony of traditional religion was recreated and adapted in towns like Abingdon through new traditions that were intended to regulate beliefs and behaviour. By the 1570s protestantism 'had begun to provide an ideology for urban rule which was disciplined, moralistic, deferential and doctrinally grounded'.[40] The 'disordered persons' of Abingdon who were to be excluded from the election of the mayor and bailiffs in 1604 were said to be 'living in riot and disorder offensive to the godly quiet and peaceable estate and government' of the town, 'some of them neither having wherewithal to live nor yet using any honest or lawful course or trade of life whereby to maintain themselves'. Earlier an order had been made in council to limit the number of alehouses because they encouraged 'idle and lewd persons'.[41] Abingdon's population grew above 2000 in the 1580s, and overcrowding may have been a source of conflict, although there is no evidence of the 'great multitude of poor people' that caused problems for Oxford's corporation.[42]

---

[38] Challenor, pp. 127-30.
[39] Challenor, p. 121, Appendix, XIII.
[40] C. Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen: the communal year at Coventry 1450-1550', in Clark and Slack (eds.), *Crisis and Order in English Towns,* pp. 57-85; Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, p. 306, and p. 7 quoting Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England,* p. ix.
[41] Challenor, Appendix, X-XII, VIII.
[42] Slack, *Poverty and Policy,* p. 68.

Tighter social, religious and administrative controls in the town can also be discerned in the changing numbers of women presenting bastard babies for baptism. There was a decrease in the recorded rate of illegitimacy in St. Helen's parish from rates higher than 7% p.a. for a number of years in the 1560s and 1570s to 1% p.a. of baptisms in the late 1500s. These statistics are against the national trend, and probably reflect a tough stance taken by the town authorities towards unmarried mothers whose origins were elsewhere and were no longer welcome at St. Helen's church or in the town itself. A hardening official attitude to bastardy reflects both the economic and religious concerns of leadership in the town. The clerk's early entries of the baptisms of illegitimate babies in the registers were frank and anecdotal, but after the 1580s the much less frequent entries make only minimal mention of bastardy.[43]

We know little about the effectiveness of the town government's efforts to control town life. In terms of popular culture the last signs of any church-related entertainment are payments by the St. Helen's churchwardens for the purchase of two dozen morris bells in 1560 and the erection of Robin Hood's bower (presumably for a Robin Hood play) in 1566.[44] But morris dancing has remained part of Abingdon's street culture, and it seems likely that the townspeople continued to enjoy the lively and varied life of a typical thoroughfare town. There was still plenty of scope for drinking in a town with a population of 2000 that was often full of visitors after the council agreed to licence a maximum of seven innholders, one vintner and twenty-two alehouse keepers in the 1590s.[45] The chamberlain's accounts for 1582-3 show

---

[43] Only a minority of the mothers of the 94 children brought for baptism between 1540 and 1600 who were definitely illegitimate had family connections in the town

[44] 'Extracts from the churchwardens accompts of the parish of St. Helen's Abington', pp. 11-22.

[45] Challenor, Appendix, VIII.

payments to two groups of players together with a payment of £4 for preachers.[46] There are no surviving accounts after 1588, so there is no way of knowing whether regular visits of players to the town continued, since they were curtailed in many godly towns. As late as 1624 an order in council forbade the mayor from permitting performances in the guildhall without consulting the burgesses, due to damage to windows, benches and pavements.[47] It sounds as though there was a popular element to the audience, although nominally the event was under the control of civic officials. The evidence for a successful imposition of 'godly rule' in Abingdon is mixed, but in general the examples of civic practice discussed above confirm a picture of an increasingly authoritarian and restrictive leadership attempting to bring order and regulation to a lively urban community.

Without evidence to the contrary we have to assume that the townspeople conformed to the decisions of their leaders and generally supported their policies. Destabilisation might have resulted from changes that restricted their political and religious choices, but was mitigated by the protection offered to them by effective government and continuing economic prosperity. In the 1620s an argument between the burgesses concerning electoral irregularities went to the Privy Council, who reported that 'the said town is troubled with faction, by means whereof things are not carried in so direct and fair a manner as were fit'.[48] But there was no suggestion that conflict among the elite damaged the efficiency of town government or indeed any indication that it had any particular impact on day-to-day life in the town. Neither is there any

---

[46] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, Vol. II, f.85.
[47] Challenor, pp. 138-9. Gloucester continued to allow players to perform until well into the seventeenth century, Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity,* p. 141. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* pp. 311ff., mentions other towns where plays and even local traditional drama continued to be allowed.
[48] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters in early modern Berkshire', p. 73.

reason to think that the peace and order of 'godly rule' was not acceptable to the majority of townspeople. The growth of personal protestant faith can be traced in wills and inventories, although these are not generally representative of the rank and file in the town. At the elite level William Kisby, whose son Robert went to Oxford, and returned as vicar of St. Helen's in 1598, owned a bible, a book of common prayer and a copy of Calvin's *Institutes*.[49] Among the 'better sort' Henry Swift, cordwainer, left a bible with a desk, and John Gosling, saddler, a bible.[50] There is only one mention of recusancy in the town, a joiner's widow who died excommunicate in 1592 and was refused burial by the minister, and roman catholicism seems to have survived in Berkshire largely as a 'country house religion'.[51] By the early 1640s 'puritan ways of thought and behaviour had become a norm' at all levels of Abingdon society.[52]

It has been suggested that the ruling sort took a two-pronged approach towards the promotion of a civic culture that supported their authority. As well as controlling beliefs and behaviour, they also tried to encourage 'a cultural perspective favourable to their interests, in which a new and selectively constructed civic memory formed a part'.[53] In considering how the town's leaders related to the townspeople it is important not to underestimate the importance of a shared past history. Discussion in previous chapters has shown that the loss of its medieval institutions had a culturally negative effect on the town and that the new leaders of the borough gave priority to restoring the image of the town and to promoting a new civic ethos. The hiatus experienced by the people of Abingdon in the immediate post-reformation period may

---

[49] BRO D/A1/200/52 (inventory of William Kysbie, 24 May 1588).
[50] BRO D/A1/115 (will of Henry Swift, 30 March 1579); D/A1/71/83 (will of John Gosling, 26 January 1588).
[51] St. Helen's Church burial register; Haigh, *English Reformations,* pp. 265f.
[52] Brod, 'Dissent and Dissenters', p. 84.
[53] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 306.

have made them particularly receptive to the new authorities in the town. Many historians think that traditional popular culture was sanitised and channelled into forms that reinforced civic culture, such as perambulations, processions and feasts.[54] New patriotic celebrations were introduced, such as the anniversary of the Queen's accession when bread and beer was purchased for the poor.[55] But in many ways the new civic culture was rooted in the memory of the past importance of the fraternity to the pre-reformation community. In the eyes of townsmen their leading families had qualified to be chosen for civic positions because of their earlier quasi-civic roles in the town. Past history may have protected the town's leadership from opposition, and acted as a strong force for unity and stability in late sixteenth century Abingdon.

In this context St. Helen's church provided a focus of continuity between the hospital and corporation and the fraternity. The governors of the hospital worshipped in the St. Katherine aisle, with the almspeople in the 'nether part', and the mayor processed to church attended by all the burgesses.[56] But it was Christ's Hospital that played a vital part as a provider of continuity and stability. The hospital had an important role as a psychological link between the townspeople and the new corporation, as the guardian of the town's pre-reformation past. The hospital was an ever-present reminder of the development of a sense of urban consciousness that had its origins in the efforts of past generations to establish an identity for the town independent of the abbey. This is highlighted by the civic career of Francis Little, who became Abingdon's second townsman MP in 1597. He held borough and hospital offices for over forty years, and was active in the creation of an urban mythology for Abingdon that fostered its

---

[54] Ibid., pp. 311ff.
[55] ABA, Chamberlain's Accounts, 1576, f.157d. The celebration probably extended to more than almsgiving, in Liverpool there was a banquet and bonfires in the same year. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, p. 321.
[56] CHA, Minutes, f.9v., f.10; Challenor, p. 128.

connection with its pre-reformation history, both in visual representation and through the written word. Little's history of the fraternity and the hospital, 'A monument of Christian magnificence' took no account of the abbey, and made little mention of the corporation. He had a particular interest in the fraternity, and had a nostalgic concept of the community spirit that it had fostered. He included in his history a poem said to have been written by a local ironmonger c.1450 which celebrated the communal nature of the bridge building project:

> it was a solace to see in a summer season, 300 ... working at once ... wives went out to ... [see] how they wrought, 5 score in a flock it was a fair sight, in broad cloths bright white bread they brought, cheese and chickens ...

Little initiated the collection of portraits in Christ Hospital's hall with the gift of 'The Bridge Builders', a commission dated 1607 which commemorated the bridges built in 1416-17 and through which he interpolated himself into fraternity history.[57] Two benefactors, Geoffrey Barbour and John Howchion are depicted in the foreground, while behind them men are working on the bridge. The almshouse, St. Helen's spire and St. Nicholas church are shown in the background. The benefactors are obviously portraits of the same man, and are supposed to be of Little himself. Francis Little exemplified the ideal standard of behaviour for a civic official. He had unsuccessfully proposed that hospital governors should not lease hospital properties and he made sure that the borough's laws and ordinances and properties were properly recorded in a 'magnificent book'. He was also instrumental in the restoration of the market cross and renovations at the hospital, including a painting of the cross. He was not the only governor with a desire to emphasise the hospital's roots in the fraternity. In the early 1600s the governors also commissioned portraits for the hospital hall of Henry VI,

---

[57] Fig. 14, p. 303. The commission is discussed in Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 48-51.


IT IS WELL DONE GOOD SERVAUNT: Matt: 25: 21:
IN MEMORYE OF IEFFORYE BARBVR AND IOHN HOWCHION BENEFACTO
ANNO DOMINI 1587 HASTE COMMAVNDED: LIB
ANNO DOMINI 1587 THIS TABLE WAS ERECTED BY THE GOVERNORS OF THIS HOSPITAL

who had granted the letters patent for the incorporation of the fraternity, and Edward VI and Sir John Mason who had respectively granted and procured the incorporation of the hospital.[58] Such paintings, often executed locally by relatively unsophisticated artists, are a distinctive expression of the civic identity that the elite were anxious to establish.[59]

Other members of the town's elite were conscious of the importance of the links between modern and pre-reformation Abingdon. The later disgraced governor William Bostock presented to the governors (as well as a portrait of himself and another of his father Lionel) a representation of Sir Peter Bessils (died 1424) who had given stone for the building of the bridges. Bostock was himself distantly connected to Sir Peter Bessils through his socially advantageous marriage to Edith Fettiplace, a member of the large north Berkshire gentry family.[60] The more respectable William Braunche, Abingdon's first townsman MP, recorded some aspects of the town's past on the flyleaf of the fraternity cartulary, probably towards the end of his life late in the 1500s. His eyewitness account of the exhumation of the bones of Geoffrey Barbour (died 1417), a founder of the fraternity, tells how they were moved from the Abingdon abbey church around the time of its demolition. He watched the bones taken up by all twelve masters of the Fraternity of the Holy Cross and removed to St. Helen's church, the main church in the town, where he witnessed their reinterment in the Fraternity Aisle. Barbour's bones retained a symbolic importance according to

---

[58] *A Monument of Christian Munificence,* ed. Cobham, pp. 121-4; Liversidge and Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays,* pp. 133-4; Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 33-46, 48-51, 54.
[59] R. Tittler, *The Face of the City: Civic Portraiture and Civic Identity in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007). There are a number of references to Abingdon, for example on pp. 7-8, 152, 159-60.
[60] Preston, *Christ's Hospital,* pp. 36-7.

the will of another leading townsman, Thomas Orpwood, who asked that his body be buried 'under the stone of Jefferye Barber'.[61]

Abingdon's new political culture can be identified as a new civic ethos legitimised by selected aspects of the town's past that were expressed through the activities of the hospital and St. Helen's church. This combination, or as Tittler puts it, 'reconstruction of civic memory', emphasised the pre-reformation traditional culture of the town but excluded any direct reference to traditional religion or to the rule of the abbey. A similar selectivity has been identified in connection with the acceptable renewal of forms of commemoration that had been damaged during the reformation.[62] However, the development of urban loyalty was too 'long-term and subtle' for any accurate assessment of the likely views of Abingdon townspeople.[63] This development was clearly hindered in a town like Bury St. Edmunds, where the elite were religiously conservative and the reconstituted Candlemas(s) guild, which acted as a quasi-corporation, was negatively identified with pre-reformation practices.[64] However, the mix of the established and the novel in Abingdon's refashioned political culture underpinned the authority of their governing bodies, and this in turn contributed to the social stability and political cohesion of the town. It is not surprising that the harmonious government of the first generation of burgesses and governors was tested in the later sixteenth century in the ways that have been discussed above. But it is clear that the majority of the civic elite were united in their religious views, their focus on the town's business economy and on the extension of their social and political control over the town.

---

[61] Cox, *Peace and War,* p. 50; TNA PROB 11/63 (will of Thomas Orpwood, 1 February 1581).
[62] Archer, 'The arts and acts of memorialisation in Early Modern London', pp. 89-116.
[63] Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns,* p. 340.
[64] Craig, *Reformation, Politics and Polemics,* pp. 64ff.

In conclusion, over the second half of the sixteenth century Abingdon had developed as a recognisably effective and functional independent urban community. The town had experienced a remarkable series of changes since the beginning of the century when it was known as a long-established, small and successful town that had been developed and was still governed by a wealthy and powerful Benedictine abbey. The abbey's dissolution in 1538 caused governmental and social disruption and discontinuity that was countered by two important factors. Firstly, Abingdon's geographical situation on trade routes gave it an important economic role in a prosperous region. Secondly, its flourishing mercantile society, although it had no formal governmental authority, was organised, able, influential and ambitious. Over the next two decades the town's leadership achieved a considerable measure of stabilisation during a period of national chaos. By the end of the 1550s, through the establishment of two incorporated institutions, the town gained a new secular and autonomous identity. This gave the civic elite the opportunity to take control and to promote good order and prosperity for their community. Interference from the state and from ambitious outsiders, together with internal political, economic, social and cultural stresses, all posed potential threats to the new borough's stability. As we have seen, economic and governmental factors continued to support the town's progress and to mitigate against many of the social problems that historians have identified in the typical late sixteenth century town.

Although Abingdon had developed a degree of distinction through the power of the abbey and its strategic position on the Thames and on trade routes, it remained a small town with no more than regional importance. However the well-documented

experience of a period of critical change in a small town adds to our understanding of a range of issues of note to urban historians. As an ecclesiastically dominated town Abingdon is of particular interest in terms of its vulnerability to all aspects of reformation change, not just in terms of the pace and progress of religious reform. Its resilience to national economic problems, and to the particular threat caused by the abbey's demise, contradicts the old assumption that it was a fragile town in decline. Its emergence as an effective and functional urban community is a key piece of evidence in the long-term debate about decline and growth in sixteenth century English towns. Sir John Mason's role in the town's reconstruction illuminates the relationship between central government and the towns. The credit that William Braunche gave him for the foundation of the hospital could well be extended to every aspect of Abingdon's transformed administration: 'renewed by Mason when all was void and clean'.[65]

The disruption of traditional relationships in Abingdon's society, and their subsequent re-establishment in the context of new formal institutions, make an important contribution to our understanding of urban oligarchic government. Abingdon is an example of a town that experienced rapid politicization, moving from an archaic subservience to a resident lord into a direct relationship with central government through the consolidation of power among its urban elite. This involved negotiation with other interested parties, including members of court and royal officials with local connections, and a local gentry that was increasingly involved in county government. In the process the growth of civic self-confidence along with the advance of godly protestantism was an important factor in the establishment of ordered government.

---

[65] Cox, *Peace and War*, p. 50, quoting from a poem in the Christ's Hospital archive.

Renewal and development was underpinned by the steady expansion of the town's broadly based economy, which supported a thriving 'middling' group of townsmen, and by the continuities that straddled the divide between the pre- and the post-reformation town.

The vulnerability of civic authority to venality and arguments has been discussed above, but it would be a mistake to think that this diminished the importance of the achievement of self-government either to the townspeople of Abingdon or to the civic elite. Within forty years of its incorporation the borough had returned William Braunche, the grandson of an Abingdon carpenter, to parliament as its first home-grown MP. In 1606 Mr. Richard Smythe, a longstanding principal burgess, resigned in a letter 'written with his own hand' and recorded in the minutes of the corporation:

> I shall seem to have been taken from you either as plucked by the hand or fallen like an autumn leaf, yet my heart's wish for the body of your estate shall be that it may grow and flourish evermore in wealth, unity and dignity, and I shall always reckon it amongst the best of my fortunes, that I have been sometimes thought a fit member of so honest a corporation.[66]

The antiquarian Elias Ashmole's different view of Abingdon has already been mentioned. In his eyes the town was indelibly linked with the fate of its abbey:

> A neat town, very ancient and remarkable for its famous Abbey, one of the Glories of England, and reproaches of sacrilege.[67]

Smith took a favourable view of incorporated government whereas Ashmole harked back to the town's pre-reformation past: both offer different strands of an answer to

---

[66] Challenor, *Selections,* p. 135. He was either the brother or cousin of Sir Thomas Smith, who was born *c.*1556 and educated in Abingdon. After Oxford Sir Thomas worked for the Earl of Leicester and the Earl of Essex, and after entering royal service held various offices under the patronage of Sir Robert Cecil, including that of Clerk of Parliament in 1597. The Smiths were related to many Abingdon elite families through marriages into the Bostock and Jennens families.
P.E.J. Hammer, 'Smith, Sir Thomas (*c.*1556–1609)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/25907, accessed 3 July 2010].
[67] Ashmole, *The Antiquities of Berkshire,* III, 111.

Collinson's question: 'What did the reformation do to or for the English towns?'.[68] We have seen, however, that the watershed events of the dissolutions generally worked to the advantage of the people of Abingdon. This analysis of the town's survival, giving an equal emphasis to the ramifications of political, economic, social and cultural change, offers an important contribution to our understanding of the age of reformation in English urban history.

[68] Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England,* p. 49.

Appendix 1

Population trends in sixteenth century Abingdon

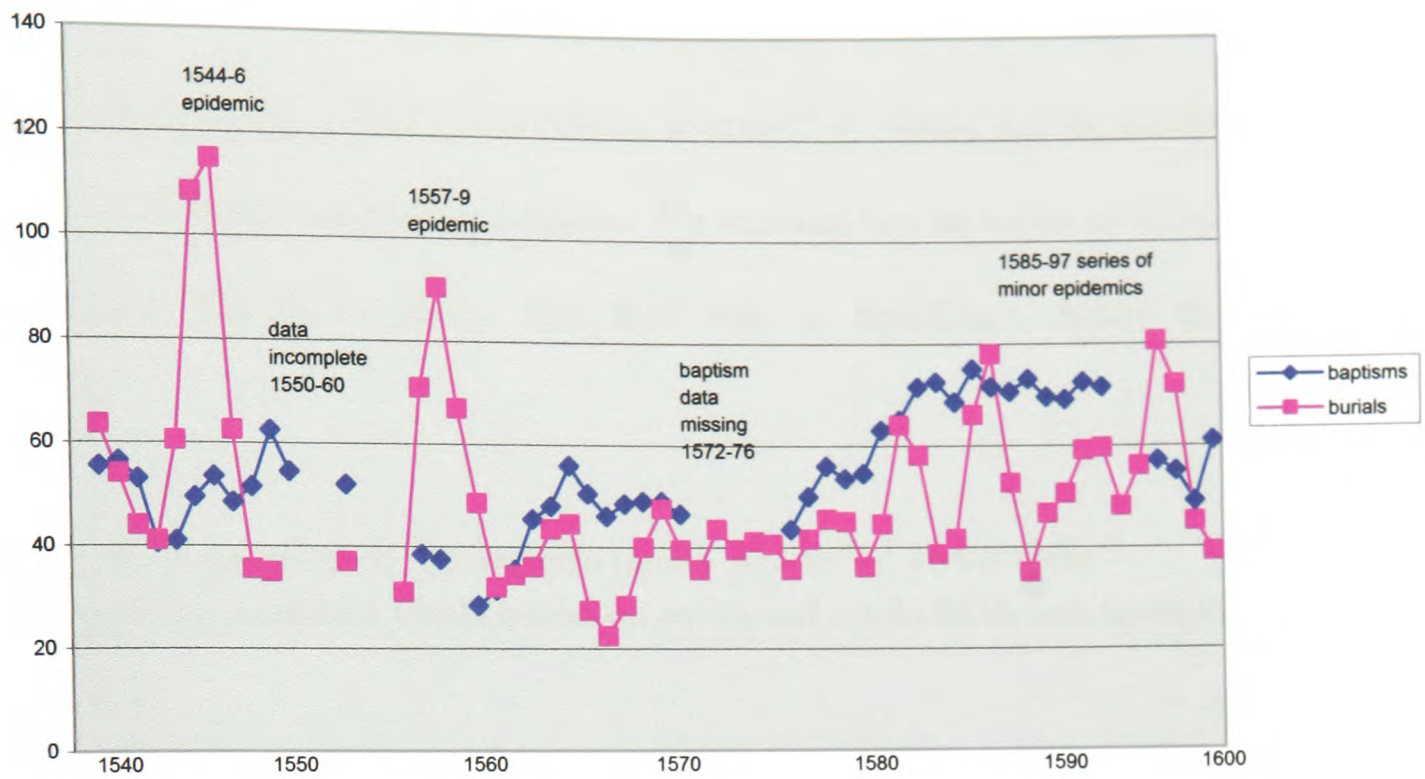
Fig.15 below compares a rolling two-year average of baptisms and burials in the Parish of St. Helen's 1539-1600. Although this is a good run of records, data is missing or is incomplete for both burials and baptisms in the 1550s, and for baptisms between 1572-6. Where possible, burial and baptismal entries for visitors to the town and for residents of the outlying hamlets of Shippon, Northcourt and Sandford have been extracted. The St. Nicholas' records for births do not survive for this period; some of the St. Nicholas' burials recorded in the St. Nicholas' register took place at St. Helen's, with entries repeated in the St. Helen's register.[1] It seems likely that some St. Nicholas' parishioners used St. Helen's for baptisms, but it is impossible to identify these with any certainty. The St. Helen's entries therefore can be assumed to include an unknown proportion of St. Nicholas' parishioners. Any estimate of the total population in Abingdon should allow for some missing St. Nicholas' parishioners. It is extremely likely that baptisms and burials were both under-recorded: the number of children mentioned in the burial register and in surviving wills whose baptisms are not recorded certainly suggest baptismal under-recording. Since it cannot be assumed that all births and deaths were recorded, population estimates based on registration should be taken as the lowest possible figure.[2]

---

[1] Comparisons between the 2 registers show that some of the St. Nicholas' burial register entries are not repeated in the St. Helen's register: either St. Helen's was under-recording or parishioners may have been buried elsewhere.

[2] P. Slack *The impact of plague in Tudor and Stuart England,* p. 55.

Fig. 15: St Helen's baptisms and burials 1539-1600
(rolling 2-year averages)

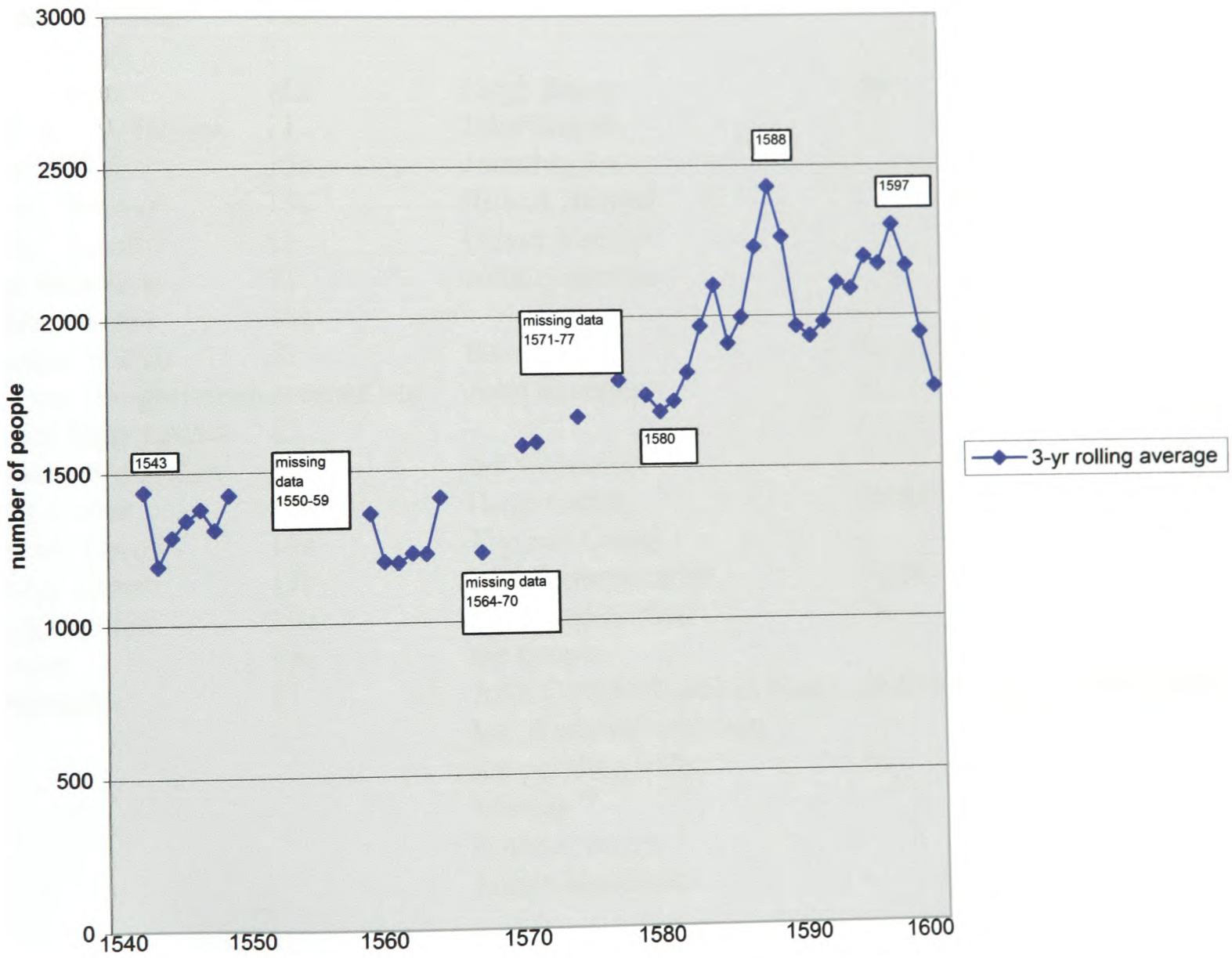


The graph indicates a gradual upward trend in the population of St. Helen's Parish towards the end of the sixteenth century. The recorded 2965 baptisms exceed the 2934 burials by only 31. In most years the birth rate exceeded the death rate, but over the sixty-year period it only just kept up with the loss of population caused by various mortality crises. By far the worst crisis was 1544-6, when there were over 150 more burials than would have been expected: 310 burials represented over a quarter of the population.

In 1557-9 there were over 100 extra burials, which represented up to a fifth of the population. Later in the century there were smaller and more frequent epidemic outbreaks: in 1563, 1578 and 1593 plague is mentioned, but there was also relatively high mortality in 1587-8 and 1597.

Fig. 16 shows a rising trend between 1541 and 1600: this was produced by applying Wrigley and Schofield's calculations of the national crude birth rate and death rate to the Abingdon data, averaging the population total results from both births and deaths, and then applying a three-year rolling average.[3] It would not be realistic to suggest that the totals are completely reliable. No account can be taken of inward or outward migration, but it is likely that this was a significant factor throughout the period.

Fig. 16: Population of St. Helen's parish Abingdon 1541-1600
(averaged population totals based on estimated crude birth and death rates)



[3] E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (paperback edn., London, 1989), Table A3.3, p. 531.

Appendix 2

Payments made by John Audlett to employees of Abingdon Abbey 1533-4[1]

Household Wages		**Livery gowns and coats against Christmas**		
Mr Ottewell	£1 10s	Mr. Ottewell	-	
Mr Harbert	£1 10s	Mr. Harbart	-	
Mr Thomson	£1 10s	Mr. Tomson	13s 4d	
John Audelet	£2	Mr Audelet	16s	*Steward*
Thomas Coke	£1 10s	Thomas Coke	16s	*Abbot's servant**
Raffe Gunnell	£1	Rauff Gunnell	12s	*Abbot's servant**
Thomas Broghton	£1	Thomas Broughton	12s	*Abbot's servant**
William Bowlar	£1	William Bollar	14s	*Audlett's relative*
William Wikes	£1	William Wykes	-	*Innholder (Hart)*
John Wilmot	-	John Wilmote	-	*Draper*
John Shene	£1	John Shene	12s	*Innholder*
John Belyngeam	£1	John Belyngeam	-	
William Chepenam	15s	William Chapman	-	
John Heythorn	£1	John Haithorn	10s	
Randoll	15s	Randoll	-	
William Coke	15s	William Coke	-	
William Brewar	15s	-	-	
John Grene	£1	-	-	
Hugh Baker	15s	Hugh Baker	8s	
John Smyth brewer	£1	John Smyth	-	
John Milles	15s	John Mylles	-	
Robert Brewer	15s	Robert Brewar	-	
Oliver Vansild	£1	Oliver Vansell	-	
John Betterton	£1	John Betterton	-	
William Hatte	15s	-	-	
Thomas Waryn	£1	the warrener	8s	
Saunder slaughterman	crossed out	John Saunders	8s	
Sander faggotmaker	£3	-	-	
Thomas Woodman	£1	the woodman	-	
Davy Carter	15s	Davy Carter	7s 4d	
Thomas Carter	15s	Thomas Carter	-	
Henrys Carter	15s	John Howys carter	7s 4d	
Slaughterman	15s	the slaughterman	7s	
Cowper	15s	the cooper	-	
Cottyshold	£1	John Cotisfold pair of hose:	2s	*maltmaker (+ wife Joan)*
		Mr. Audelett's servant	-	
		the pudding wife	6s	
		Marshe	-	
		Poynter carter	-	
		James horseman	-	
Total	£35 10s		£16 19s	

*yeoman who received bequest in the former Abbot's will TNA PROB 11/28 (21 April 1540)

[1] BRO/D/EP/7/33.

Appendix 3 Table 10: Leading Abingdon townsmen 1548-1600

	Master of Fraternity	Governor Christ's Hospital	Master	Principal Burgess	Mayor	business activities	comment
Adam Pope	x						
William Kelyng	x						
Gilbert Freeman	x						
Richard Braunche	x					cloth	
Nicholas Hewitt	x					draper	
Thomas Hyde	x						
Lionel Woodward	x						
Thomas Mayott	x						
John Bostock	x					draper	
William Bisley	x					draper	
Oliver Hyde gent*		1553-66			1561	land	
Thomas Reade gent	x	1553-56				gentry	MP
Thomas Bisley gent		1553				gentry	
Richard Mayott*	x	1553-78	1569-70	1556-78	1556, 1568, 1578	land	
William Mathew*		1553-58		1556-8	1557	draper	
Humfrey Bostock	x	1553-78		x	1558	mercer	
John Shene	x	1553				draper	
James Fisher		1553-87	1572, 1579	x	1560, 1566, 1578	innholder	
Robert Overthrow		1553-57				mercer/grocer	
Thomas Tonks		1553-		x	1559	baker	
Thomas Medowe		1553-57				chandler	
Thomas Tesdale		-1556				innholder	
Richard Ely		1557-8		1556-8		yeoman	
William Blacknall				x	1572	innholder	
Thomas Orpwood		by 1561	1571	x	1562, 1569, 1575	miller	
Ralph Bostock				x		innholder	
Thomas Jennens*				x		draper?	
John Chantrell als Clerk		1563-80		x	1576	draper	
William Whittington				x		clerk/scribe	
Thomas Smythe		1558-96	1577	x	1567, 1573, 1583	tailor	
Robert Charlton						land	
Richard Large				x		innholder	
						chandler	

	Master of Fraternity	Governor Christ's Hospital	Master	Principal Burgess	Mayor	business activities	comment
William Braunche		by 1561	1573-5, 1594	x1599	1563, 1571, 1582, 1587	draper	
Richard Smythe				?	?	land	
Mark Aldworth						tanner	secondary burgess
William Symkyns		by 1566		x		tanner/innholder	
Robert Lynge						yeoman farmer	secondary burgess
Henry Harper						glazier	chamberlain 1560
Edmund Cordywell		by 1575				innholder	chamberlain 1561
Richard Tesdale		x				saddler/yeoman	chamberlain 1562
Robert Stevenson				x		vintner	
Richard Quelche		by 1573		x	1574	linen draper/mercer	
John Mayo						yeoman	
Thomas Mayott		by 1574	1581	x1599	1584, 1589	draper	
John Fisher		1580-1602		x1599	1580	mercer	
Lionel Bostock		x	1586	x1599	1570, 1577, 1586, 1594	?draper	
Antony Bostock		1582-5				?draper	
Thomas Jennens		1578-		?		innkeeper	secondary burgess
William Hill						mercer	chamberlain 1568
Thomas Milles						shoemaker	chamberlain 1569-73
William Kisby		x	1587		1581, 1587	vintner	
Thomas Powis						?	secondary burgess
Paul Orpwood				x	1585, 1593	yeoman farmer	
Thomas Tesdale		x	1579	x		yeoman farmer	
Humfrey Hyde				x1599	1579, 1588, 1595	gent	
Roger Allen						husbandman	secondary burgess
John Goodwin						ironmonger	secondary burgess
Henry Ayers				x	1587	mercer/chandler	
William Lee		1587-		x1599	1590	butcher	
William Hart				x	1591	attorney?	
Francis Brook (als Little)		1592-		x1599	1592, 1598	vintner	
Robert Payne				x1599	1596	draper	
Antony Tesdale		x	1587	x1599	1597	yeoman farmer	
Christopher Tesdale		1594-		x1599	1599	yeoman farmer	
Thomas Stampe		1574-82	1575-6			lawyer	
John Wise		x	1589			yeoman	Chamberlain 1563

	Master of Fraternity	Governor Christ's Hospital	Master	Principal Burgess	Mayor	business activities	comment
William Welling		1587-		x1599		saddler	
John Blacknall		1597-			1603	miller	secondary burgess
John Winsmore		1597-				dyer	bailiff 1586
John Bolt						draper	secondary burgess
Richard Bolt						draper	secondary burgess
John Lee				x1599		butcher	
Thomas Braunche				x1599		draper	
Richard Smythe				x1599		gent	younger?
Thomas Gallant						innkeeper	secondary burgess
Thomas Cordwell							secondary burgess
Lionel Welford						draper	secondary burgess
Thomas Bradford						bargeman/mercer	secondary burgess
Richard Ely junior		x				innholder	

Dates in red = first men in office

*lent money for Christ's Hospital charter

Dates in blue = Named in the 1599 list of principal and secondary burgesses, Challenor, Appendix I.

Appendix 4

Occupations of 576 individuals recorded in Abingdon 1525-1600

Occupation	Numbers in occupation		
Leather			
Glover	19		
Shoemaker/ Cordwainer	40		
Cobbler	5		
Parchment-maker	3		
Currier	5		
Saddler	9		
Tanner	13		
Collarmaker	5	TOTAL	99
Hospitality – food and drink			
Innholder	14		
Vintner	5		
Cellarer	2		
Tapster	9		
Brewer	7		
Maltster	2		
Butcher	24		
Ostler	7		
Baker	15		
Cook	1		
Musician	2	TOTAL	88
Building			
Mason	14		
Sawyer	14		
Carpenter	14		
Painter	8		
Glazier/plumber	4		
Slater	9		
Thatcher	2		
Pavior	1	TOTAL	66
Food production			
Yeoman	8 [who are exclusively involved in agriculture]		
Cowherd	1		
Shepherd	4		
Labourer/ Husbandman	38		
Fisherman	1		
Miller	11	TOTAL	63

Metal and Wood crafts

Tinker	4		
Cutler	7		
Smith	13		
Farrier	1		
Pewterer	6		
Ironmonger	1		
Joiner	10		
Turner	3		
Bowyer	1		
Fletcher	1		
Cooper	7		
Wheeler	4		
Hurdlemaker	1		
Sievemaker	3	TOTAL	62

Religion, education, medicine and administration

Clergy	20		
Sexton	2		
Clerk/scrivener	10		
Schoolmaster	10		
Sergeant	2		
Surgeon	5		
Midwife	4		
Barber	5	TOTAL	58

Cloth

Weaver	33 (including 4 master weavers)		
Dyer	3		
Fuller	12		
Shearman	1		
Clothier	2	TOTAL	51

Distributive – shopkeeper/wholesaler

Draper	21		
Chandler	8		
Mercer	12		
Fishmonger	1		
Grocer	3	TOTAL	45

Clothing

Tailor	18		
Capper/haberdasher	5		
Capknitter	2		
Hosier	1	TOTAL	26

Transport			
Carrier	10		
Carter	1		
Bargeman	2	TOTAL	13
Miscellaneous			
Horseleech	1		
Ropemaker	3		
'Scourer' (ditch-cleaner) 1	5	TOTAL	9

Bibliography

Manuscript and Archival Sources

Abingdon, Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

Mayor's Book (photographs of pp. 19-123), a listing of Abingdon borough leases dated 1562-1639 under the heading 'A brief of all the leases granted by the Mayor, Bailiffs and Burgesses ... with a brief note of all and every covenant therein contained'.

Abingdon, Borough Archive

Abingdon Town Council Offices.

Amyce Survey, 1554.

Borough Charter, 1555.

Borough Chamberlain's Accounts, Vol. I, 1557-81, Vol. II, 1582-88.

Ms. List of Mayors from 1556, compiled by A.E. Preston.

St. Helen's and St. Nicholas' Overseers Accounts, 1607-33.

Verney Deeds, 1538-1625.

Abingdon, Christ's Hospital Archive

Minutes Book, includes text of Letters Patent 18 May 1553, Statutes made 12 June 1558, Minutes from 1577.

Rental survey of properties granted to Christ's Hospital, 18 May 1553, Roger Amyce, 1553.

Accounts, 1553-1606, including a full rental dated *c.*1577.

Calendar of Documents, Vol. 2, 1399-1538; Vol. 3, Later Documents.

Ms. List of Governors and Masters from 1553, compiled by A.E. Preston.

Abingdon, St. Helen's Church Archive

Registers of Baptisms, Burials and Marriages from 1538 (transcribed on CD by Oxfordshire Family History Society, OXF-AB01).

Berkshire Record Office

9 Coley Avenue, Reading.

D/A1, wills, inventories and administration accounts.

D/EP/7, Preston Papers including

D/EP7 (AEP A(2)), Amyce Survey 1554.

D/EP/7/33 transcription of the fraternity rent roll, 1547-8; transcription of Abingdon abbey accounts 1534-5; transcriptions of Chantry certificates.

D/EP/7/37 and /38 transcription of Minister's Accounts for 1538 and 1539 including rental lists.

D/EP/7/94, biographical notes.

D/P2, registers of St. Nicholas', Abingdon (transcribed on CD as for St. Helen's).

Bodleian Library, Oxford

Mss. Rolls, Berks: 9-10 (1547-8), Accounts of revenues from land in Berkshire within the jurisdiction of the Court of Augmentations.

The National Archives
Kew, London.
C 1 Chancery.
E/101/458/1, Accounts relating to the demolition of the abbey church, March-May 1538.
E179/73/128 (1525), /134 (1524), /156 (1540), /164 (1543), /216 (1560), Subsidy assessments.
LR2/187 ff.196-214, Rental survey of properties in Abingdon made by Roger Amyce, October 1554.
PROB 11, PCC wills.
SP 1, State papers, Henry VIII.

Printed Primary Sources

Adams, S. (ed.), *Household Accounts and Disbursement Books of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester,* (Camden Soc., 5th Series, 6, 1995).
Bolton, J.L., and Maslen, M.M. (eds.), *Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of Witney 1538-1610* (ORS, 54, 1985).
Brewer, J.S., Gairdner, J., Brodie, R.H. (eds.), *Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII* (23 vols., 1862-1932).
Brinkworth, E.R.C. (ed.), *The Archdeacon's Court: Liber Actorum 1584* (ORS, 31, 2 vols., 1942-46).
Bruce, J. (ed.), *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family* (Camden Society, 56, 1853).
Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward VI (5 vols., 1924-9), *Philip and Mary* (4 vols., 1936-9) *Elizabeth* (1939-present day).
Caley, J. (ed.), *Valor Ecclesiasticus temp. Henry VIII auctoritate regie institutus* (6 vols., Record Society, 1810-34).
Challenor, B. (ed.), *Selections from the Municipal Chronicles of the Borough of Abingdon 1555-1897* (Abingdon, 1898).
Cobham, C.D. (ed.), *A Monument of Christian Munificence,* by Francis Little *c.*1627 (Oxford, 1871).
Cook, G.H. (comp.), *Letters to Cromwell and others on the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London, 1965).
Dasent, J.R. (ed.), *Acts of the Privy Council of England, 1542-1631* (46 vols., 1890-1964).
Dickens, A.G. (ed.), *Tudor Treatises* (Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 125, 1959).
Edelen, G. (ed.), *The Description of England by William Harrison* (New York, 1968).
Evett, M.B. (ed.), *Henry Porter's The Two Angry Women of Abington: a Critical Edition* (New York, 1980).
Hanham, A. (ed.), *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488* (Oxford, 1975).
Hudson, J. (ed.), *Historia Ecclesie Abbendoniensis: The History of the Church of Abingdon* (2 vols., Oxford, 2007).
Jordan, W.K. (ed.), *The Chronicle and Political Papers of King Edward VI* (London, 1966).
Lambrick, G., and Slade, C.F. (eds.), *Two Cartularies of Abingdon Abbey* (OHS, New Series 32-3, 2 vols., 1990-2).
Leadam, I.S. (ed.), *The Domesday of Inclosures 1517-18* (RHS, 2 vols., 1897).
Lyte, H.C.M., *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Edward III* (14 vols., HMSO, 1886-1913).

Morgan, P. (ed.), *Domesday Book, Berkshire* (Chichester, 1979).
Mortimer, I. (ed.), *Berkshire Probate Accounts 1583-1712* (Berkshire Record Society, 4, 1999).
Roberts, E., and Parker, K. (eds.), *Southampton Probate Inventories 1447-1575* (Southampton Record Series, 2 vols., 34-5, 1992).
Rylands, W.H. (ed.), *The Four Visitations of Berkshire* (Harleian Society, 56 and 57, 1907-8).
Smith, L.T. (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland* (5 vols., London, 1906-10).
Stevens, K.F., and Olding, T.E. (eds.), *The Brokage Books of Southampton 1477-8 and 1527-8* (Southampton Record Series, 28, 1985).
Tawney, R.H., and Power, E. (eds.), *Tudor Economic Documents,* (3 vols., London, 1924).
Ward, J., 'Extracts from the churchwardens accompts of the parish of St. Helen's Abington ... with some observations on them by Professor Ward', *Archaeologia,* I (Society of Antiquaries of London, 1770), 11-22.
Weaver, J.R.H., and Bearwood, A. (eds.), *Some Oxfordshire Wills 1393-1510,* (ORS, 39, 1958).
Wordie, J.R. (ed.), *Enclosure in Berkshire, 1485-1885,* Berkshire Record Society, 5 (Reading, 2000).

Printed Secondary Works

Abrams, P., and Wrigley, E.A. (eds.), *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1978).
Adams, S., 'Dudley, Robert, earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588)', *ODNB,* Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/8160, accessed 29 April 2010].
Airs, M., *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House* (Stroud, 1995).
Allen, T.G., 'An 'oppidum' at Abingdon Oxfordshire', *South Midlands Archaeology,* 21 (1991), 97-9.
Archer, I.W., *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991).
Archer, I.W., 'Politics and government, 1540-1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II, (Cambridge, 2000), 235-62.
Archer, I.W., 'The arts and acts of memorialization in early modern London', in J. Merritt, *Imagining Early London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 89-116.
Archer, I.W., 'Hospitals in sixteenth and seventeenth century England', in Martin Scheutz *et al* (eds.), *Hospitals and Institutional Care in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Munich, 2008), pp. 53-74.
Arkell, T., Evans, N., and Goose, N. (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part, Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000).
Arkell, T., 'Interpreting Probate Inventories', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 72-102.
Ashmole, E., *The Antiquities of Berkshire* (3 vols., London, 1719).
Aston, M., 'English ruins and English history: the dissolution and the sense of the past', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 36 (1973), 231-55.
Aston, M., *Lollards and Reformers* (London, 1984).

Baigent, E., 'Hovenden, Robert (1544–1614)', *ODNB,* Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/13881. accessed 7 June 2010].
Baker, A., *Historic Streets of Abingdon* (Abingdon, 1957).
Baker, A., *Historic Abingdon: Fifty Six Articles* (Abingdon, 1963).
Barry J. (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1990).
Barry, J., and Brooks, C. (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People* (London, 1994).
Baskerville, G., *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London, 1937).
Bearman, R. (ed.), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (London, 1997).
Bearman, R., 'The early reformation experience in a Warwickshire market town: Stratford-upon-Avon 1530-1580', *Midland History*, 32 (2007), 68-109.
Beier, A.L., *Masterless Men: the Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London, 1987).
Beier, A.L., and Finlay, R. (eds.), *London 1500-1700: the Making of the Metropolis* (London, 1986).
Bindoff, S.T. (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1503-58* (History of Parliament: 3 vols., 1982).
Bond, J., *Monastic Landscapes* (Stroud, 2004).
Borsay, P., 'Early modern urban landscapes 1540-1800', in P. Waller (ed.), *The English Urban Landscape* (Oxford, 2000) pp. 99-124.
Borsay, P., and Proudfoot, L. (eds.), 'Introduction', *Provincial Towns in Early Modern England and Ireland* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 1-29.
Boulton, J., *Neighbourhood and Society: a London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987).
Boulton, J., 'London 1540–1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH*, II (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 315–46.
Bowden, P.J., *The Wool Trade of Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1962).
Bridbury, A.R., *Economic Growth: England in the later Middle Ages* (London, 1962).
Brigden, S., *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989).
Brigden, S., 'Religion and Social obligation in early sixteenth century London', *Past & Present*, 103 (1984), 67-112.
Brigden, S., *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: the Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603* (London, 2000).
Britnell, R.H., *Growth and Decline in Colchester 1300-1525* (Cambridge, 1986).
Britnell, R.H., 'The Economy of British towns 1300-1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 313-33.
Bryson, A., 'Edward VI's 'speciall men': crown and locality in Mid Tudor England', *Historical Research,* 82:216 (May, 2009), 229-53.
Byford, M., 'The birth of a protestant town: the process of reformation in Tudor Colchester, 1530-80', in P. Collinson and P. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 23-47.
Campbell, B.M.S., *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region c.1300* (London, 1993).
Carter, P.R.N., 'Mason, Sir John (*c.*1503–1566)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/18278, accessed 10 Sept 2010].

Carter, J., and Smith, J., *Inns and Alehouses of Abingdon 1550-1978* (Abingdon, 1978).
Catchpole, A., Clark, D., and Peberdy, R., *Burford, Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* (London, 2008).
Chalklin, C.W., 'South east', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (Cambridge, 2000) pp. 49-66.
Chartres, J.A., 'Food consumption and internal trade', in A.L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500-1700* (London, 1986), pp. 168-96.
Clark, J.G., 'Reformation and reaction at St. Albans Abbey, 1530-58', *EHR,* 115 (2000), 297-328.
Clark, P. (ed.), *The Early Modern Town: A Reader* (London, 1976).
Clark, P. (ed.), *Country Towns in Pre-Industrial England* (Leicester, 1981).
Clark, P. (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995).
Clark, P.,''The Ramoth-Gilead of the Good': Gloucester 1540-1640', in J. Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1998), pp. 244-73.
Clark, P., 'Introduction', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (2000), pp. 1-24.
Clark, P., and Slack, P., *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972).
Clark, P., and Slack, P., *English Towns in Transition* (Oxford, 1976).
Clark, P., and Murfin, L., *The History of Maidstone: the Making of a Modern County Town* (Stroud, 1995).
Clifford, H., 'Herrick, Nicholas (1542–1592)', *ODNB,* online edn, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/54563, accessed 2 June 2010].
Collinson, P., *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Basingstoke, 1988).
Collinson, P., and Craig, J. (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (Basingstoke, 1998).
Corfield, P.J., 'Urban development in England and Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in J. Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1990), pp. 35-62.
Corfield, P.J., 'East Anglia', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 31-48.
Cornwall, J.C.K., *Wealth and Society in Early Sixteenth century England* (London, 1988).
Cox, M., *Abingdon, Abbey to Borough* (Abingdon, 1974).
Cox, M., *Medieval Abingdon* (Abingdon, 1990).
Cox, M., *Abingdon 1556-1702* (Abingdon, 1993).
Cox, N., and Dannehl, K., *Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities 1550-1820* (University of Wolverhampton, 2007, British History Online Edition).
Craig, J., 'Reformers, conflict and revisionism: the reformation in sixteenth century Hadleigh', *The Historical Journal,* 42:1 (1999), 1-23.
Craig, J., *Reformation, Politics and Polemics: the Growth of Protestantism in East Anglian Market Towns 1500-1610* (Aldershot, 2001).
Craig, J., 'John Jewel, 1522-71', *ODNB,* Oxford University Press, 2004, online edn, Jan 2008, [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/14810, accessed 28 July 2010].
Cross, C., 'Monasteries and Society in sixteenth century Yorkshire: the last years of Roche abbey', in J. Burton and K. Stöber (eds.), *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 229-40.
Crouch, D.F., *Piety, Fraternity and Power* (Bury St. Edmunds, 2000).

Cunich, P., 'The dissolution of the chantries' in P. Collinson and P. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns* (London, 1998), pp. 159-74.
Cunich, P., 'The ex-religious in post-dissolution society: symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?', in J.G. Clark (ed.), *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England'* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 227-38.
Cunich, P., 'The Dissolutions and their Aftermath', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, 2004, paperback edn. 2009), pp. 221-37.
Davis, R.H.C., 'The ford, the river and the city', *Oxoniensia,* 38 (1974), 258-68.
Dickens, A.G., *The English Reformation* (London, 2nd edn., 1989).
Dils, J. (ed.), *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* (Reading, 1998).
Dobson, R.B., 'Urban decline in late medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 5th series, 27 (1977), 1-22.
Dobson, R.B., 'Cathedral Chapters and Cathedral Cities: York, Durham and Carlisle in the fifteenth century', *Northern History,* 19 (1983), 15-44.
Dobson, R.B., 'General Survey 1300-1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 273-90.
Duffy, E., *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (London, 1992).
Duffy, E., *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English village* (London, paperback edn. 2003).
Dyer, A., *The City of Worcester in the Sixteenth Century* (Leicester, 1973).
Dyer, A., *Decline and Growth in English Towns 1400-1640* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1995).
Dyer, A., 'Crisis and Resolution: Government and Society in Stratford, 1540-1640', in R. Bearman (ed.), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (Stroud, 1997), pp. 80-96.
Dyer, A., 'The Early Modern Town: Toward a Clearer Definition?', *Journal of Urban History* 26 (1999), 74-82.
Dyer, A., 'Appendix: ranking lists of English medieval towns', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 747-70.
Dyer, A., 'Small market towns, 1540-1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH,* II (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 425-50.
Dyer, A., 'Urban decline in England 1377-1525', in T.R. Slater (ed.), *Towns in Decline, AD 100-1600* (Aldershot, 2000).
Dyer, A., 'Small towns in England 1600-1800', in P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (eds.), *Provincial towns in Early Modern England and Ireland* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 53-67.
Dyer, A., 'The Urban Economy', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn. 2009), pp. 330-46.
Dyer, C., 'Small-town conflict in the later Middle Ages: events at Shipston-on-Stour', *Urban History,* 19 (1992), 183-210.
Dyer, C., 'Small towns 1270-1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH* I, (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 505-37.
Dyer, C., 'Small places with large consequences: the importance of small towns in England 1000-1540', *Historical Research,* 75:1 (2002), 1-24.
Dyos, H.J., 'Editorial', *Urban History Yearbook,* 1 (1974), 3-5.
Elton, G.R., *Policy and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972).

Evans, N., 'The occupations and status of male testators in Cambridgeshire 1551-1800', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 176-88.
Everitt, A.M., *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-60* (Leicester, 1966).
Everitt, A.M., 'The marketing of agricultural produce', in J.Thirsk (ed.), *Ag.HEW*, IV (Cambridge, 1967), 467-589.
Everitt, A.M. (ed.), *Perspectives in English Urban History* (London, 1973).
Everitt, A.M., 'The Banburys of England', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1 (1974), 28-38.
Feingold, M., 'Rainolds, John (1549–1607)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Oct 2006. [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23029, accessed 26 March 2007].
Fisher, F.J., 'Development of the London food market 1540-1640', *Ec.HR*, 5:2, (1935), 46-64.
Fox, A., *Oral and Literate Cultures in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000).
Gelling, M., 'The hill of Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, 22 (1957), 54-62.
Glennie, P., and Whyte, I., 'Towns in an agrarian economy 1540-1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *CUH*, II (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 167-93.
Goldman, L. (ed.), *ODNB 2001-2004* (Oxford, 2009).
Goodacre, J., *The Transformation of a Peasant Economy: Townspeople and Villagers in the Lutterworth area 1500-1700* (Aldershot, 1994).
Goose, N., 'Decay and regeneration in seventeenth-century Reading: a study in a changing economy', *Southern History*, 6 (1984), 53-74.
Goose, N., 'Household size and structure in early-Stuart Cambridge', in J. Barry (ed.), *The Tudor and Stuart Town, a Reader in English Urban History 1530-1688* (London, 1990), pp. 74-120.
Goose, N., 'Urban demography in pre-industrial England: what is to be done?', *Urban History*, 21:2 (1994), 273-84.
Gottfried, R.S., 'Bury St. Edmunds and the populations of late medieval English towns 1270-1530', *Journal of British Studies*, 20:1 (1980), 1-31.
Gottfried, R.S., *Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290-1539* (Princeton, 1982).
Gras, N.S.B., *The Evolution of the English Corn Market from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1915).
Graves, M.A.R., 'Wriothesley, Thomas, first earl of Southampton (1505–1550)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/30076, accessed 8 Sept 2010].
Griffiths, P., Fox, A., Hindle, S. (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London, 1996).
Griffiths, P., and Jenner, M. (eds.), *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000).
Gunn, S.J., *Early Tudor Government, 1485-1558* (London, 1995).
Haigh, C., *English Reformations, Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993).
Halliday, K., 'New light on 'the commotion time' of 1549: the Oxfordshire rising', *Historical Research*, 82 (2009), 655-76.
Hammer, P. E. J., 'Smith, Sir Thomas (*c.*1556–1609)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/25907, accessed 3 July 2010].

Hasler, P.W. (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1558-1603* (History of Parliament: 3 vols., 1981-2).
Hasted, E., *A Historical and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent* (12 vols.. 1797-1801).
Harding, V., 'Twenty years of writing on London history, 1975–1995: early modern London, 1550–1700', *London Journal*, 20 (1995), 34-45.
Harding, V., 'Recent perspectives on early modern London', *The Historical Journal*, 47:2 (2004), 435-50.
Harding, V., 'Reformation and culture, 1540–1700', in P. Clark, (ed.), *CUH*, Vol. II (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 263–88.
Harvey, B., *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977).
Harvey, B., *Living and Dying in England, 1100-1540: the Monastic Experience* (Oxford, 1993).
Harvey, P.D.A., *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village* (Oxford, 1965).
Henig, M., and Booth, P., *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 2000).
Hill, J.W.F., *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1956).
Hoskins, W.G., *Industry, Trade and People in Exeter 1688-1800* (Manchester, 1935).
Hoskins, W.G., *Local History in England* (London, 1959).
Hoskins, W.G., *The Age of Plunder: King Henry's England, 1500-1547* (London, 1976).
Hoyle, R., *Tudor Taxation Records: a Guide for Users* (London, 1994).
Hughes, A., 'Building a Godly Town: Religious and Cultural divisions in Stratford-upon-Avon, 1560-1640', in R. Bearman (ed.), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (London, 1997), pp. 97-109.
Hurry, J.B., *Reading Abbey* (London, 1901).
Hutton, R., *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford,1994).
Jack, S., *Towns in Tudor and Stuart Britain* (London, 1996).
Jackson, C.A., 'Clothmaking and the Economy of 16th Century Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, 67 (2002), 59-78.
James, M., 'Ritual drama and the social body in the late medieval English town', *Past & Present*, 98 (1983), 3-29.
Jurkowski, M., Smith, C.L., Crook, D., *Lay Taxes in England and Wales 1188-1688* (London, 1998).
Keen, M., *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348-1500* (London, 1990).
Kirby, J.W., 'A Leeds elite: the principal burgesses of the first Leeds corporation', *Northern History*, 20 (1984), 88-107.
Kitch, M.J., 'Capital and kingdom: migration to later Stuart London' in A.L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London, 1986), pp. 224-51.
Knowles, D., *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge, 1940).
Knowles, D., *Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge, 1956).
Kümin, B., *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560* (Aldershot, 1996).
Lambrick, G., 'Abingdon and the riots of 1327', *Oxoniensia*, 29 (1964), 129-41.
Lambrick, G., 'The impeachment of the Abbot of Abingdon in 1368', *EHR*, 82 (1967), 250-76.
Lambrick, G., 'Some old roads of North Berkshire' *Oxoniensia*, 34 (1969), 78-93.

Lamburn, D., 'Politics and Religion in Early Modern Beverley', in P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 63-78.
Laslett, P., *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1965).
Lehmberg, S., 'Wroth, Sir Thomas (1518?–1573)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/30084, accessed 10 Sept 2010].
Lilley, K.D., 'Decline or decay? Urban landscapes in late medieval England' in T.R. Slater (ed.), *Towns in Decline* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 235-65.
Lindley, K., 'Early Modern Urban Britain: Regions, Themes, and Types', *Journal of Urban History*, 28 (2001), 120-9.
Litzenberger, C., *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire, 1540-80* (Cambridge, 1997).
Litzenberger, C., 'The coming of Protestantism to Elizabethan Tewkesbury', in P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (London, 1998), pp. 79-93.
Liversidge, W.J.H. and M.J.H., *Abingdon Essays* (Abingdon, 1989).
Loades, D., 'Winter, Sir William (*c.*1525–1589)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2009 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/29769, accessed 26 March 2010].
Lock, J., 'Prime, John (1549/50–1596)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22792, accessed 26 March 2007].
Lock, J., 'Abbot, Robert (1559/60–1618)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8, accessed 26 March 2007].
Lysons, D. and S., *Magna Britannia: Berkshire* (London, 1806).
MacCaffrey, W.T., *Exeter 1540-1640: the Growth of an English County Town* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).
MacCulloch, D., *Suffolk and the Tudors: Politics and Religion in an English County 1500-1600* (Oxford, 1986).
Marcombe, D., *English Small Town Life, Retford 1520-1642* (Nottingham, 1993).
Marsh, C., *Popular Religion in Sixteenth Century England* (London, 1998).
Marsh, C., 'Attitudes to will making in early modern England', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 158-75.
Marshall, P., *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002).
Martin, J., 'Leadership and Priorities in Reading during the Reformation' in P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns* (London, 1998), pp. 113-29.
Mayhew, G., *Tudor Rye* (Falmer, 1987).
Merritt, J.F. (ed.), *Imagining Early London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720* (Cambridge, 2001).
Muldrew, C., *The Economy of Obligation* (London, 1998).
Overton, M., Whittle, J., Dean, D., and Hann, A., *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, 2004).
Palliser, D.M., *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979).
Palliser, D.M., 'Civic mentality and the environment in Tudor York', *Northern History*, 18 (1982), 78-115.
Palliser, D.M., 'Popular Reactions to the Reformation during the Years of Uncertainty', in C. Haigh (ed.), *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 94-113.
Palliser, D.M., *The Age of Elizabeth* (London, 2nd edn., 1992).

Patten, J., *English Towns 1500-1700* (Folkestone, 1978).
Patterson, C.F., *Urban Patronage in Early Modern England* (Stanford, 1999).
Patterson, C.F., 'Town and City government', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn. 2009), pp. 116-32.
Peberdy, R.B., 'Navigation on the river Thames between London and Oxford in the late middle ages: a reconsideration', *Oxoniensia,* 61 (1996), 311-40.
Pelling, M., 'Healing the sick poor: social policy and disability in Norwich 1550-1640', *Medical History,* 29 (1985), 115-37.
Phythian-Adams, C., 'Ceremony and the Citizen: the communal year at Coventry 1450-1550', in P. Clark and P. Slack (eds.), *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700* (London, 1972), pp. 57-85.
Phythian-Adams, C., *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979).
Phythian-Adams, C. (ed.), *Societies, Cultures and Kinship 1580-1850: Cultural Provinces in English Local History* (Leicester, 1993).
Platt, C., *Medieval England* (London, 1978).
Postles, D., 'An English small town in the later middle ages: Loughborough', *Urban History,* 20:1 (1993), 7-29.
Preston, A.E., *Christ's Hospital, Abingdon* (Oxford, 1930).
Preston, A.E., *St. Nicholas, Abingdon and other papers* (Oxford, 1929, republished 1971).
Prior, M., 'The accounts of Thomas West of Wallingford, a sixteenth-century trader on the Thames', *Oxoniensia,* 46 (1981), 73-93.
Prior, M., *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen and Canal Boatmen in Oxford 1500-1900* (Oxford, 1982).
Rappaport, S., *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth Century London* (Cambridge, 1989).
Richardson, W.C., *History of the Court of Augmentations* (Baton Rouge, 1961).
Riordan, M., 'Henry VIII, privy chamber of (*act.* 1509–1547)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/70825, accessed 10 Sept 2010].
Roberts, M.R., *et al*, 'Excavations at 83-88 Ock St., Abingdon', *Oxoniensia,* 62 (1997), 178.
Rodger R., and Sweet, R., 'The changing nature of urban history' in 'The City' (Spring, 2008) [http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/City/articles/sweet.htm, accessed 4 January 2010].
Rodwell, K., *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire,* Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Survey, Vol. 3 (1975).
Rosser, G., *Medieval Westminster, 1200-1540* (Oxford, 1989).
Rosser, G., 'Urban culture and the church 1300-1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *CUH,* I, (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 334-70.
Rushton, N., 'Monastic charitable provision in Tudor England: quantifying and qualifying poor relief in the early sixteenth century', *Continuity and Change,* 16 (2001), 9-44.
Scarisbrick, J.J., *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford,1984).
Schofield, R.S., 'The distribution of wealth in England, 1334-1649', *Ec.HR,* New series, 18 (1965), 483-510.
Schofield, R.S., *Taxation under the early Tudors 1485-1547* (Oxford, 2004).
Shagan, E., *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003).

Shepard, A., and Withington, P. (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester, 2000).
Skeeters, M.C., *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation, c.1530-c.1570* (Oxford, 1993).
Slack, P., 'Social policy and the constraints of government 1547-58', in R. Tittler and J. Loach (eds.), *The Mid-Tudor Polity c.1540-1560* (New Jersey, 1980), pp. 94-115.
Slack, P., *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1985).
Slack, P., *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988).
Spufford, M., 'Religious preambles and the scribes of villagers' wills in Cambridgeshire, 1570-1700', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 144-57.
Steane, J., 'The Abingdon Monks' Map', *Oxoniensia*, 73 (2008), 17-32.
Stenton, F.M., *The Early History of Abingdon Abbey* (originally published 1913, Stamford, facsimile reprint, 1989).
Thacker, F.S., *The Thames Highway: General History* (2 vols., New York, 1914).
Thirsk, J. (ed.), *Ag.HEW,* IV (Cambridge, 1967).
Thirsk, J., *Economic Policy and Projects: the Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978).
Thomas, J.H., *Town Government in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1933).
Thomson, J.A.F., *The Later Lollards* (Oxford, 1975).
Thomson, J.A.F., 'Perkins [Maundeville] William', *ODNB,* Oxford 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/25210, accessed 9 Sept 2010].
Tiller, K., 'Shopkeeping in 17th-century Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia,* 62 (1997), 269-86.
Tiller, K., *English Local History: the State of the Art* (University of Cambridge Board of C.E., Occasional Paper No. 1, 1998).
Tittler, R., 'The emergence of urban policy 1536-58', in R. Tittler and J. Loach (eds.), *The mid-Tudor Polity c.1540-1560* (New Jersey, 1980), pp.74-93.
Tittler, R., *Architecture and Power: the Town Hall and the English Urban Community, c.1500-1640* (Oxford, 1991).
Tittler, R., *The Reformation and the Towns in England: Politics and Political Culture, c.1540-1640* (Oxford, 1998).
Tittler, R., 'Reformation, Resources and Authority: an overview', in P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500-1640* (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 190-201.
Tittler, R., 'Bacon, Sir Nicholas (1510–1579)', *ODNB*, Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/1002, accessed 10 Sept 2010].
Tittler, R., *The Face of the City: Civic Portraiture and Civic Identity in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007).
Tittler, R., 'Society and Social relations', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn., 2009), pp. 363-80.
Townley, S., *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River* (London, 2009).
Townsend, J., *A History of Abingdon* (London, 1910).
Tytler, P.F., *England under the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, illustrated in a series of original letters never before printed with historical introductions and biographical and critical notes* (2 vols., London, 1839).
Underdown, D., *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English town in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1993).

VCH, Berkshire (4 vols., 1906-24).
VCH, Essex (1903-present day).
VCH, Gloucestershire (1907-present day).
VCH, Hertfordshire (4 vols., 1902-14).
VCH, Oxfordshire (1939-present day).
VCH, Staffordshire (1908-present day).
VCH, Yorkshire (1914-present day), *City of York* (1982).
Wall, A., *Power and Protest in England 1525-1640* (London, 2000).
Ward, J.P., 'Metropolitan London', in R. Tittler and N. Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Oxford, paperback edn. 2009), pp. 347-62.
Whiting, R., *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1989).
Whiting, R., *Local Responses to the English Reformation* (Basingstoke, 1998).
Williams, P., 'Government and Politics in Ludlow 1590-1642', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society,* 56 (1961), 282-94.
Willis, B., *An History of the Mitred Parliamentary Abbies and Conventual Cathedral Churches* (London, 2 vols., 1718-19).
Withington, P., *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005).
Wood, A., *Rebellion, Riot and Popular Politics* (Basingstoke, 2002).
Wrightson, K., *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982).
Wrightson, K., *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470-1750* (London, 2000).
Wrigley, E.A., and Schofield, R.S., *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A reconstruction* (paperback edn., London, 1989).
Yates, M., 'Change and Continuities in Rural Society from the Later Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century: The Contribution of West Berkshire' *Ec.HR.,* New Series, 52:4 (1999), 617-37.
Yates, M., *Town and Countryside in Western Berkshire 1327-1600* (Woodbridge, 2007).
Yorke, B., 'Aethelwold (904x9-984)', *ODNB,* online edn, Oxford, 2004 [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/8920, accessed 9 Sept 2010] .
Youings, J.A., *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London, 1971).
Zell, M., 'Landholding and the land market in early modern Kent' in M. Zell (ed.), *Early Modern Kent 1540-1640* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 39-74.

Unpublished Theses and Dissertations

Brod, M., 'Dissent and dissenters in early modern Berkshire' (Oxford Univ. D. Phil. thesis, 2002).
Cumber, M.J., 'The Society and Economy of the town of Abingdon, *c.*1520-56' (Oxford Univ. M.St. dissertation, 2001).
Durston, C., 'Berkshire and its county gentry' (Reading Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1977).
Jackson, C.A., 'The Berkshire Woollen Industry, 1500-1650' (Reading Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1993).
Martin, J., 'The people of Reading and the reformation, 1520-70: Leadership and Priorities in Borough and Parishes' (BRO, Reading Univ. unsubmitted Ph.D. thesis, 1987).

Rosen, A., 'Economic and Social Aspects of Winchester 1520-1670' (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1975).
Todd, B.H., 'Widowhood in a market town, Abingdon 1540-1720 (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1983).
Yates, M., 'Continuity and change in rural society c.1400-1600: West Hanney and Shaw (Berkshire) and their region' (Oxford Univ. D.Phil. thesis, 1997).

Unpublished Papers

Short, B., 'The precarious rise of regional history in England and Wales', seminar paper delivered 5 March 2002, Rewley House, Oxford.

Websites

The Clergy of the Church of England Database
[http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/index.html].
Cumnor Parish Record [http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/external/cumnor/].
Mayors of Oxford
[http://www.headington.org.uk/oxon/mayors/1485_1603/index.htm].