DRAFT

THE RIOTS OF 1327

Domesday(1086) book tells us of the earliest commercial development in Abingdon. There were "ten merchants dwelling in front of the church gate". The right to hold a weekly market in the town had been granted by Edward the Confessor and confirmed by Henry I

However, the reign of Henry II saw a long running legal dispute between the people of Wallingford and Oxford with the Abbey over its rights to hold a market. On one occasion the men of Wallingford descended on the town to try to break up the market but they were routed by the Abbey's retainers. Eventually the King found in favour of the abbey and confirmed the right to hold a full weekly market. There had also been disputes over the annual fairs. St Edmund's Fair, granted by royal charter in 1290 seems to have been particularly contentious and in 1295 a 'multitude of malefactors' broke up the fair and assaulted the Abbey's bailiff's, appointed to oversee the fair.

In the year 1327 England was in turmoil. In January, the King, Edward II had been deposed by his queen Isabella, 'the She-wolf of France' and her lover, Roger Mortimer, Earl of March. There had been riots against the great Benedictine abbeys of St Albans and Bury St Edmunds by discontented townspeople.

In April, longstanding grievances about markets and fairs, between the merchants and tradesmen of Abingdon and the abbey spilled over into violence. After a meeting in St Helen's church (the 'town church' unlike St Nicholas which seems to have served mainly for Abbey lay staff) a large group of townspeople destroyed the geldhall, where the abbey collected taxes and dues. They went on to attack the abbey gateway but were repelled and 2 of them were killed by abbey servants.

A few days later a mob, including the mayor and corporation and numerous students, arrived overnight from Oxford, burning the abbey's manors of Barton and Northcourt on the way, together with the townspeople of Abingdon they then attacked the abbey. Many of the monks, including the abbot, fled across the river by boat and some may have drowned on the way.

The rioters looted books, vestments, gold, silver, cloth and food and destroyed many documents belonging to the abbey and others which local landowners had deposited for safekeeping. In modern parlance, anything that wasn't nailed down was carried off or destroyed! The prior (the abbot's deputy) was taken to Bagley wood and made to agree to sign a document absolving the rioters and granting them the right to govern the town. This may well have been deliberately symbolic as Bagley Wood was where the Abbey held its court for the hundred of Hormer.

After a few days, when the rioters' demands had been drawn up as a charter, the prior sealed the document in front of a public notary.

Several weeks later, many of the rioters were arrested and taken to Wallingford castle where 12 of them were hanged.

This, however did not put an end to the disputes as there were many subsequent court cases. In 1345 there was a legal dispute between the Abbey kitchener and a merchant about the right to erect market stalls and in 1363 nine people, including one woman, were prosecuted for using swords, knifes and clubs to demolish market stalls. The most prolonged case started in 1368 when the Abbot was impeached for extorting money in the form of market tolls and dues to which he was not entitled. At first things went in favour of the town but by dragging out the case until 1372 it was eventually decided in favour of the Abbot.

Interestingly, there is no record of unrest in Abingdon at the time of the Peasant's Revolt in 1381, whereas hostilities were resumed at Bury St Edmunds and St Albans.

At the end of the 14[th]c Another cause of resentment by the town surfaced. This was the Abbey's insistence on its right to bury the townspeople in the monastic cemetery, thereby entitling it to various levies and bequests. The townspeople wanted their dead buried at St Helens. After another prolonged lawsuit the Abbey won and it was ordered that 65 bodies buried at St Helens should be exhumed and re-buried within the Abbey precincts.

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