The Lost Abbey of Abingdon Booklet
Notes prepared by Dr. Janey Cumber

These notes are drawn from her doctoral thesis where many of the topics are dealt with in much more detail:

'Tudor Abingdon: the experience of change and renewal in a sixteenth century town' (submitted 2010)

Copies of the thesis are deposited at the Bodleian Library (*MS. D.Phil. c.23656)* and the Continuing Education Library at Rewley House (*942.57 ABI/C (Local Collection Oversize)*, Oxford, as well as in Abingdon Town Council archive and Christ's Hospital archive.

1) The Abbey and the Town

Geography

The central focus of medieval Abingdon was the market place, called the bury, at the abbey gateway. Town and abbey were most intimately connected here where economic and administrative activities were concentrated. Interactions and confrontations between the two halves of the town were centred here. The town development as a marketing centre depended on its position on the Thames, on the north-south route between the midlands and the south coast, and on the east-west road from London across the Cotswolds to Bristol and Gloucester. In the early middle ages river traffic was probably as important as road, especially for heavy goods, and there were riverside wharves in Abingdon. By 1350 there was little or no river traffic upstream from Culham, and navigation upstream from Henley became increasingly economic. This must have been an important factor in the building of the two bridges, joined by a causeway, across the Thames in 1416-18.

Commerce

The settlement associated with the abbey had some urban characteristics in the eleventh century. Domesday Book (1086) mentions 10 merchants dwelling in front of the church gate as well as 64 villagers and 34 smallholders. This indicates a population of at least 500. If Abingdon followed the pattern of other medieval settlements the population would have risen gradually and fallen after the Black Death. In the early 1500s there were about 800 people in the town. Many of them would still have been totally or partly involved with agriculture: the rest were craftsmen and tradesmen. In the early middle ages the abbey actively encouraged Abingdon's development as a market town in rivalry with Wallingford and Oxford. The abbey lobbied for privileges, the most lucrative was the prestigious St. Mary's Fair, held for a week in association with the abbey's patronal festival on 8 September. The abbey retained its close control of twice-weekly markets and five annual fairs until its dissolution.

Abingdon was an important local marketing centre by 1300, the main centre of exchange in north Berkshire, a wealthy region in a wealthy county. By 1300 Abingdon was at the end of a supply chain sending corn to London, and the centre of a developing rural cloth industry. The town was integrated into both local and national trading networks. In the late 1400s Richard Cely stopped at Abingdon en route between London and Northleach to meet his woolpacker, who was coming up from Southampton.

The changing relationship between town and abbey

It was inevitable that the town's secular society developed alongside this growing commercial wealth and status. It was in this context that active confrontation over rights and privileges flared up. This does not mean the abbey was unduly repressive. The townsmen came to view the abbey's monopoly of trading profits in the town as exploitative, and wanted a greater share.

The 1400s saw a new and more cordial phase of relations between town and abbey. A new guild, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross replaced the Guild of Our Lady in St. Helen's church as a focus for civic leadership. An incomer, Geoffrey Barbour, a wealthy Bristol wool merchant who originated in Wales, became a leading civic investor and benefactor. The fraternity fostered a lay society in the town that could operate independently of the abbey, but in a manner that was acceptably conservative. The abbey was evidently happy with the activities of the leading members of the town: they built almshouses, a fourth aisle at St. Helen's church and a magnificent market cross as well as the new bridges. The market cross with its statues of kings and saints and escutcheons asserted their new role at the centre of town life and made a public claim to their share in the town's cultural history.

[There is a reconstruction of this drawn by Henry Taunt which can be found on the internet – but the scale is wrong – and also the cross was copied for Coventry in 1542 – Liversidge, W.J.H. and M.J.H., *Abingdon Essays* (Abingdon, 1989), pp.42-57]

The fraternity's membership and activities were elitist, and after 1400 its leading officials spoke and acted for the town. Although fraternities are thought to have fostered social unity and neighbourliness between different classes, it is questionable as to whether ordinary Abingdon townspeople identified with the town's leading families any more than they did with the abbey.

[The annual fraternity feast was not open to everyone: payment was expected for food, and it cost extra for a seat.]

Although there was never any formal town government by guild during the middle ages, by the early 1500s elite townsmen had gained a degree of informal power and privilege through collaboration with the abbey. Some of them were appointed as town bailiffs; others were buried in the abbey church rather than at St. Helen's. The abbey's role as consumer and employer created a co-dependency between town and abbey. Many Abingdon men and women were tenants of the abbey (some better-off townspeople were freeholders, but most were tenants at will). In 1538 the abbey still retained a large proportion (about 70%) of the property in the town.

In Stert Street and Burford Street (now Bridge St) the abbey had direct control over all but one of 60 properties, and granted only a few freeholds. This might have been a security measure, perhaps dating back to the attack on the abbey precinct in 1327. 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 river Stert and the abbey wall. The side of the Stert was in St. Nicholas' parish, and it is possible that the housing was originally for abbey servants and dependents. In contrast properties in the Bury were of high rental value and status.

[As far as the wall between the houses and the precinct is concerned, the general view is that it pre-dated the 1327 troubles, although it might have been strengthened when the abbey defences were improved. There are references to the 'wall of the garden' dating back to the 1200s in Abingdon charters. Lambrick G. & Slade, C.F. (eds), *Two cartularies of Abingdon Abbey*, OHS, New Series 32-3, 2 vols 1990-2), I, p.198, L292. Gabrielle Lambrick says that houses under the garden wall are those built between the western wall of the abbey garden and the Stert stream.]

2. The abbey's surrender

There is no evidence in the 1500s that monasticism was unpopular in Abingdon. By 1538 the abbey was a shadow of the powerful institution it had once been, but there is no impartial evidence of decay or neglect. Abbots continued to have national political influence and to entertain royalty. The crown's intention to suppress monasticism and confiscate monastic property turned from rumour to reality during the 1530s, and the last abbot, Thomas Pentecost, had probably been preparing for surrender for some years. He looked for and received favourable terms, and Abingdon was one of the first important monasteries to surrender. The Deed of Surrender was signed by the abbot, the prior and 24 monks on 9 February 1538. There was at least one monk who dissented: he was sent off to the custody of Bishop Shaxton of Salisbury, for threatening two other monks ['by the mass ye are accursed']. The abbot received a good pension based on the former wealth of Abingdon abbey (£200 p.a.) and the grant of the manor house of Cumnor Place probably reflects his cooperation. The other monks received pensions more in line with monks elsewhere.

[The National Archive holds the surrender document and the royal accounts re. demolition]

The decommissioning of the abbey precinct was a much more destructive event than the ejection of the monks. The site was initially considered for conversion into a royal residence, but this plan was rejected, supposedly because the buildings and the setting were inadequate. Within a month the demolition of the abbey church and its associated sacred buildings began. Large quantities of good quality building materials, faced stone and lead, was shipped down the Thames by river barge from Culham wharf, for recycling in royal building projects. Both the spiritual and the cultural status of the site was lost, and its prestige never returned. Local people may have expected that the abbey site would become the residence of a layperson of status, but over the next few years the precinct was gradually downgraded; it fell into various degrees of private industrial and domestic use, and in some parts there was disuse and dereliction. Only the gatehouse and the buildings that fronted onto Bridge St. retained their status in the town; after the borough was incorporated in 1556 they were purchased and converted for the use of the new administration. In the 1560s Roysse's school started in buildings that had previously been used for the abbey's charitable work.

Nine of the 27 monks of Abingdon who signed the surrender document are known to have stayed in the area, and at least four of them continued to live and work in and around the town. Two were employed as chantry priests in St. Nicholas and St.

Helen's churches. This offered for those who wanted it a continuing link with traditional religious practice in a time when religious observance and parish life was transformed.

The town's society, economy, politics, cultural and religious life and landscape were all affected in different ways by the dissolution of the abbey. The dissolution was a dramatic finale to the six hundred years or so of the abbey's history, and a trigger for changes of all kinds, both positive and negative. On the whole, Abingdon stands out as a community which coped with the upheavals of the reformation. The town's successful economy helped its survival, and its leading families negotiated for two new institutions, the Borough and Christ's Hospital, through which they would run the town.

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