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Abingdon - monastic estate to borough

Good evening.

It is a particular honour to be invited to give the Lambrick Lecture to this society, but to me it is all the more pleasing that it is named in honour of Gabrielle Lambrick. Abingdon has had more than its fair share of good local historians but it is Gabrielle Lambrick who more than any other epitomises my own ideal of how local history ought to be done. She does not see her locality as a universe all to itself, where things happen arbitrarily and without relevance to anything going on elsewhere. Her work on medieval Abingdon is notable for its insistence on context - a national political context for the riots of 1327, which was perhaps relatively straightforward, but, for the lawsuits of 1368, she goes deeply into the minutiae of the medieval laws of land tenure, which will have been anything but.

Well, tonight our subject is not medieval, it is Abingdon in the sixteenth century. I am sure you have all heard a lot about this, from me among others, and you are fully aware of the dissolution of the Abbey and the guilds, and the issuance of charters to Christ's Hospital and the borough. You have probably heard so much about these things that you'd really rather not hear any more.

But the reason why I offered to speak on this tonight is that I am not totally happy with how the story is traditionally told. The rules of the game say that you find some people or events in the town's records and base your analysis and your narrative on them. This is well and good for a bigger town like Bristol or Exeter. But in a small town like Abingdon the records are by comparison few and sketchy, so the traditional story is seriously incomplete.

Now, what I want to do in this talk is to describe precisely those sixteenth century changes that would have directly affected the average man or woman in the Abingdon street, and I don't want to be limited by the chance survival or non-survival of the records. So I'm going to break a few of the usual rules. There has been a lot of work recently intended to get a general view of what was happening in small towns like Abingdon throughout the country, largely thanks to non-English historians like Robert Tittler in Montreal. When something is happening generally in small towns like Abingdon, I will risk saying it happened here as well even if I can't point to specific local examples. Abingdon was exceptional in certain ways, as we will come to, but if something was happening everywhere else and had the force of the law and the watchfulness of the Privy Council behind it, it's safe to assume that it was happening here as well.

Before I start, some more acknowledgements. I must mention the enormous mass of documents, notes and transcripts left by AE Preston and now in the Berkshire Record Office in Reading. I have used those intensively as one has to, and also the excellent thesis of 2010 by the late and deeply lamented Janey Cumber. Ideally it would be Janey, and not me, giving this talk, but fate unfortunately decided otherwise.

Now, what is so special about the sixteenth century that we give it so much attention?

There were three things that happened, three processes that started and went on. There was the demographic transition to a rapid rise in population. According to the best approximations we can make, Abingdon had a population in 1540 of about 1400 and by 1600 it had grown fifty percent, to about twenty-one hundred. So we need to be alert to problems with incomers, and housing shortages.

And inflation. Between 1500 and 1600 food prices rose fourfold while wages increased by barely two and a half times. So we need to wonder about social conflict and economic stringency. I'll say now that neither of

those processes seems to have had the serious consequences in Abingdon that might be expected.

The thing that did have consequences was the Reformation. Let's leave the theology out of it, but its impact on a place like Abingdon was as a series of boulders crashing into a pond. Enormous ones like the dissolution of the abbey and then of the guilds, massive ones like the looting of the churches of the treasures they had accumulated over hundreds of years. Surges back and forth as the Tudor monarchs followed each other. There was the obliteration of memory and the re-writing of history, about which I will have more to say. The history of Abingdon in the sixteenth century is almost exclusively the story of the effect of the Reformation on the town and its short and long-term consequences.

Ok, let's get down to detail. I am going to divide the rest of this talk rather untidily into three parts. First, I'll deal with the economic development of the town - job prospects, trade and industry, housing. Then, social life and religion, which in the sixteenth century were to all intents and purposes the same thing. And lastly, governance: who ran Abingdon, and how well did they do it.

The thing we must remember about the economy of Abingdon before the Reformation is that it operated on two levels. There was the abbey, and there was the normal economy of a local centre, a market town catering to its largely agricultural hinterland and also a road town, through which trade and traffic passed thanks to its bridge over the Thames. That normal economy was not directly affected by the Reformation, which has led some Abingdon historians to feel that the economic effect of the abbey's dissolution might not have been too serious. I don't agree with that. The abbey was one of the richest in England. It collected its income from estates all over Berkshire and elsewhere. It no doubt spent a lot of that where it was generated, but a lot of it also came to the centre, in Abingdon where it supported a lot of employment. There were specialist trades like parchment making which would inevitably die with the abbey, but the main impact will have been felt among the less skilled workers.

It has been written that there were only thirty-eight abbey servants who lost their jobs at the dissolution, and some of those probably followed the ex-monks to their new home in Cumnor. But in a town of 1400 population, an increase of even a couple of dozen people on the unemployment rolls is going to be a significant burden. Especially when the abbey, which had been a source of poor relief, no longer is.

But that can't be all. There were the people who serviced the abbey, working there not regularly but when needed - washerwomen, repairmen, builders and roofers. There is a list of such people from a much earlier time, with over a hundred names on it. It could hardly have been any shorter in the sixteenth century. So the amount of employment available in Abingdon must have gone down with a bump when the abbey disappeared, even though we can't quantify it. We do know that there was no difficulty getting labour at short notice for the demolition of the abbey - at least thirty local men were available for immediate employment.

And then there is the economic effect of the monks themselves. If you have some idea from your schooldays of monks as ascetic individuals living a life of poverty, celibacy and obedience, that is not a fair picture. Rich monasteries like Abingdon recruited from the higher reaches of society and poverty was not part of the deal. Benedictine monks had to wear black habits, but they were of good quality cloth and well-tailored. They ate well; the ban on meat had been abandoned centuries earlier, and the money they got, nominally as pocket money to supplement a scanty diet, was actually well above the wages they paid their employees who had families to feed. So the removal of twenty-odd affluent individuals from the local market place was another blow to the incomes of a section of the local economy.

The unemployment problem was recognised early on, but at first not much was done about it. What I have called the 'normal' economy of the town seems to have been based primarily on trade rather than manufacture, especially the cloth trade, and on inn-keeping, what we

would now call the hospitality industry. There was a Burford manufacturer named John Jones who had seven looms working in Abingdon, and he offered to expand, but got no local support. There was some relief in a way that cannot have been terribly welcome - an epidemic that started in 1544 and continued for three years, in which the normal death rate was more than doubled. So there were briefly fewer people to share the work available, but once the epidemic subsided, the population continued growing. The Holy Cross guild seems to have maintained some sort of social security payments, and the Court of Augmentations, the body that looked after the government's new acquisitions, did some building repairs. But the guild was abolished in its turn in 1548. The future for Abingdon's lower-level workers must have looked bleak.

The situation was saved by a new man who came in as the Court of Augmentations' representative in Berkshire, Roger Amyce, an unsung, or insufficiently sung, hero of Abingdon's development, always for some reason sadly under-rated by Abingdon historians. It was Amyce who brought the entrepreneur William Blacknall into Abingdon to rebuild the old abbey fulling mill and revitalise the local cloth industry. He brought a Breton, Francis Owdery, to start an operation making sailcloth and teach the techniques. Blacknall also extended the town's fisheries upstream. There were probably more initiatives than we know of. After the town got its charter and Amyce went away, it was the Corporation that took over responsibility, and I'll come on to that later.

So it seems that there was a period after the dissolution of the abbey in 1538 when there must have been a real problem of poverty and under-employment in the town, but that this began to ease in the 1550's. All the evidence we have, from tax assessments, wills, leases is that Abingdon in the second half of the century retained a full complement of people who were managing well, or were reasonably prosperous, or frankly wealthy.

It's much harder to assess what happened in the lower ranks of society, those on the threshold of poverty or below it. About the only definite

evidence we have is rent arrears among those who were leasing direct from the Corporation or the Hospital, and they seem always to have been few and manageable. Evictions were very rare indeed. But that may well not have been the case among poorer people who are more likely to have been subtenants. About them we know nothing.

And since I've mentioned rent arrears, so how about housing? Did the housing stock keep pace with the growing population?

It seems that it did. Housing was actually the success story of sixteenth century Abingdon, and the great validation of the decision of its chief citizens to seek incorporation. You may remember that the preamble to the charter talks about the dilapidation of Abingdon's buildings. This fitted the regular political discourse of the time, which blamed the Court of Augmentations for incompetence and corruption and failing to keep the Crown's property in good repair. Most of the property in Abingdon had belonged to the Abbey, and most of the rest to the guilds, so almost all of it had devolved on the Crown. Some freeholds were sold off, but, thanks mostly to Roger Amyce, the bulk finished up with the new Corporation and with Christ's Hospital. We can be reasonably sure that that is exactly what the leading townsmen had intended. And what they did with it is a great tribute to the ability and public spirit of the early leaders of those institutions.

In principle, and according to Amyce's calculations, the Corporation paid the Crown a fee farm rent that was equal to the rent expected from its properties less the cost of repairs and maintenance. So far as the Crown was concerned, giving Abingdon its charter kept its net income unchanged and freed it of the hassle of repairs and maintenance which it was not really capable of organising. So you would expect that immediately after the charter all the rental income of the Corporation would be used to pay the fee farm rent to the Crown. In fact, the newly acquired properties were divided into two roughly equal halves; one part was held by the mayor and bailiffs and paid the rent while the other went to the chamberlain, essentially the town's treasurer, and was used for

the town's routine expenses. So the actual rental income must have been considerably higher than what had been forecast.

I can't give a full explanation of how this sleight of hand was actually achieved. Too few accounts survive to give a clear picture. But it does seem that when the Corporation or Christ's Hospital granted leases they expected the leaseholder to do his own repairs. The early leases were unusually long, 31 years was common and even up to 51, and rentals were kept at a level that gave leaseholders an incentive to build new and expand existing buildings on their holdings and sublet them. We don't find evidence of a housing shortage even later in the century; that doesn't prove there wasn't one, but there are no serious campaigns against unapproved incomers or squatters, and the Corporation was very tolerant of tenants who fell behind with their payments and almost never evicted anyone. It would seem that the profit the Corporation and the Hospital made from their housing stock and the freedom of action that this gave them was an important factor in the general prosperity of the town throughout the later sixteenth century. There was no great need for taxation, and the chamberlain was often able to use his surplus - he was always in surplus - for business loans.

This was also where the corporation members and the hospital governors got some recompense for their own efforts, by taking head leases or granting them to their friends for favours, and then subletting at a profit, or allowing themselves loans on easy terms out of their corporate funds. A bit naughty perhaps, and it did become a serious political issue, but only late in the century.

As we move on in the sixteenth century, the economy of the town developed. It was never a manufacturing centre, like Newbury or Reading, and that was perhaps a good thing. After about 1550, there was a definite trade cycle, affecting especially the cloth trades, and there were periods when those two towns were seriously depressed. Abingdon did not suffer in this way. It provided an increasing range of artisan skills and professional services, and participated in long-distance trade, especially toward London. Towards the end of the

century, malting became an important activity, and everyone who could afford it had a malthouse or a malting floor built into their house or an outhouse, and there were complaints that the roads were being damaged by the sheer weight of barley and malt being carried.

So overall we have to accept that Abingdon did reasonably well economically in the sixteenth century. It recovered from the shock of the dissolutions, and the opportunities given it in the charters of the Corporation and Christ's Hospital were fully and skilfully taken advantage of.

OK, we now move to the second of my three categories, the cultural and religious life of the town. I don't expect anyone had any difficulty understanding what I had to say about Abingdon's economy. Trade, employment, housing policy are just as familiar to us as they were for our predecessors. But social and religious matters are very different. It takes an effort for us today to understand them in sixteenth century terms. It's not just that pre-reformation Christianity was different from what came after, it's a very different kind of religion, with different aims and objectives.

Let's look at some specifics for Abingdon. Back in the fifteenth century, the Holy Cross Fraternity got its charters, in fact two of them. As we are programmed to see this, it was an arrangement by which Abingdon's bridges and through roads would be maintained and its poor looked after. But in seeing it like this we are missing a major part of the picture. It was also an arrangement which produced prayers that would benefit the living people of Abingdon and also their dead. Prayers would speed souls through purgatory. The prayers of the poor were especially valuable; they were thought to be more effective than those of other people, for instance of the priests who were also employed by the guild.

And the guild made a lot of its money by recruiting members from far and wide outside Abingdon to share in the benefits. We know this from the earliest of our local historians, Francis Little whose book of 1627 mentions many outsiders who were members and patrons. I found, by

one of these lucky chances when you are looking for something else, a certain Richard Drayton, living in Kent and without any obvious links with Abingdon, who became a 'brother' of the Holy Cross guild in 1468. This was the last year of his life, and his entrance fee, which was three shillings and fourpence, a sixth of a pound, was paid by his executors. It was enough to put him on the Mortalege or bede roll, the list of people to be specifically prayed for. It was either his decision, in his last illness, to arrange for these extra prayers, or it was done after his death by his family.

So perhaps a better way to understand the Holy Cross guild is that its primary purpose was providing prayers for its members. Care of the poor and of the local bridges and roads was obviously desirable and useful, and indeed it was a religious duty, but it was a secondary product, not the main one.

There were other such organisations with more limited aims. There was the Guild of Our Lady, based, like the Holy Cross, in St Helens, which seems to have limited itself to looking after the lady chapel with its ceiling paintings, and praying to its patroness. And without doubt there must have been others that we know nothing of.

All this of course came to a sudden end at the Reformation, when purgatory was abolished and prayers for the dead forbidden. One way of looking at the charters given to the Hospital and the Corporation is that they represented a basic re-organisation of local administration, so that a range of local needs could be looked after with money, but without any need for prayers.

When in the sixteenth century people thought of the society they lived in, their ideal was one of harmony, and they worried that there were differences of interest and all sorts of disagreements and conflicts that might arise, and these had somehow to be neutralised, otherwise there was a risk of anarchy. We all know that inter-personal conflict is endemic in any society, but what added to it in early modern times was the fact that business ran on credit, and record-keeping and accounting were

rudimentary. The system ran on compromise and reconciliation rather than on exact accounting and fixed legal rules. Religion was a major part of that mechanism. You couldn't take holy communion if you were at odds with any of your fellow-worshippers. You might even be refused the pax at the Sunday mass. It was part of the job of a priest to reconcile hostile parties, and one of the conditions of being a member of a guild was always that you would submit any conflict with other members to mediation or arbitration. One of the unintended consequences of the Reformation was to limit the mechanisms available for reducing the level of conflict within society.

Contemporaries also put a lot of emphasis on more general social activities to actually prevent serious differences breaking out in the first place. One was people eating together. All guilds had their annual feasts, and we know from Little's book that the Holy Cross banquet was a spectacular event, with people attending from far and wide, enormous amounts of food and drink consumed - you could either have table service or cafeteria-style - and entertainment ranging from acrobats and tumblers to choirs performing dirges for deceased members. It went on for several days in early May. It was probably at one of these feasts in 1458 that the ironmonger Richard Forman recited his moralistic poem on the building of Abingdon Bridge. And everything finished with a mass at St Helen's and more prayers, and Little assures us - from his later Protestant vantage point - that it all made a good profit in cash.

On a less formal basis, there were a lot of social activities that centred on the churches. Each of the aisles at St Helen's was dedicated to its own saint and had its own altars, and there will have been informal groups of people who looked after them. There will have been lots of smaller altars, images in niches, lights kept burning either commemorative or supplicatory, and groups or individuals who took it on themselves to maintain them – provide them with clothes and keep them clean and pay for the candles. The image of a saint in the church was something you could relate to - you could go and talk to it and tell it your troubles, and thank it if its intervention proved helpful, adorn it in some way, or complain if it didn't. People who could afford it would present or

bequeath liturgical items - usually with their name on it! - which would testify through the generations to the piety of themselves and their family.

And the church was also the location for a lot of performance art. Mass itself was a performance. There were regular processions with relics or banners carried round the church or round the town; there was the Easter watch, the 'creeping to the Cross' on Good Friday, but there was also a tradition of amateur theatricals when local people put on their versions of well-known tales, not necessarily on religious themes. Long after King Edward's commissioners had looted the churches of all the treasures they had accumulated over the centuries, after Elizabeth had countermanded the restorations under her sister Mary, St Helen's still had something they called 'Robin Hood's Bower' - obviously a piece of scenery for one of these performances.

So the Reformation brought about an enormous change in the social and cultural life of the town. You could no longer put flowers or lights by the image of your favourite saint or burn candles to commemorate somebody who had died. The walls of the churches were blank, whitewashed, and with biblical texts on them for the only visual relief. We have to suppose, though it isn't written anywhere, that the ceiling paintings in the lady chapel of St Helen's were also covered with whitewash, since otherwise they would almost certainly have fallen victim to the iconoclastic frenzies that took place from time to time. The ceremonies and processions that marked the ecclesiastical year - they just stopped. We don't have details for Abingdon for anything other than the Holy Cross festival, but the point of these events was that they were the community in action - everybody took part, walking or sitting in due order with the people they worked with, or with an age group of young men or unmarried women. The trend was to have less and less of such sociability, less contact between different ranks of the social hierarchy. The poor and sick lost status; their prayers no longer had any particular value, so it became easier to see them as a burden, a problem, not members of society with entitlements, but outsiders to be commanded and controlled. It used to be said that the Reformation marked a

transition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft,* primitive inclusive community and modern impersonal society. That's hugely oversimplified and romanticised, but it is not entirely wrong.

So, what did survive, and what came in place of what had been lost?

One procession that may have been new - I'm not sure whether it was, but in the new conditions it certainly became much more important, was the beating of the bounds every three years at Rogation time. This will have been within a few weeks of the Holy Cross day when the guild festival had been held, so it may have been seen as in some way a continuation of that. The boundaries of the town had been specified in great detail in the charter of 1556, and it was obviously important that townsfolk knew where these boundaries were. The perambulation had been for blessing the local fields and marking a boundary that diabolical influences couldn't cross. It now became a purely civic festival. All freemen had to participate and pay for their food and drink, or if they weren't there they still had to pay. In at least one year,1562, things got out of hand, and the chamberlain had eventually to find an extra £1 1s 6d to make up a deficit. That's over 2% of his average annual turnover.

The tradition of amateur dramatics seems to have died out in Abingdon as it did, gradually, elsewhere. Theatricals became a professional activity, with troupes of players travelling round the country under the patronage of great magnates like the Earl of Leicester or the Queen herself. They came irregularly but quite frequently to Abingdon, on average about once a year - perhaps more, the list we have is certainly not complete. What would happen was that they would get the mayor's permission to set up in the Guildhall, the mayor would attend the first performance to make sure that everything was politically correct, and if he was really impressed the players might get a bonus or some entertainment at the town's expense. There was always a lot of excitement, sometimes the guildhall would need repairs after a visit. It's tempting to think of this as the work of the extreme protestants who became increasingly opposed to theatricals as the century wore on, but

it's much more likely that it was simply the dissatisfaction of people who just couldn't get tickets and were hoping to get in via the windows.

But if play-acting was something special, there was probably no shortage of other entertainments, though we only get occasional glimpses of them in the records. There were certainly performing bears who came to town, probably mummers and acrobats. What entertainments local people put up for themselves and their friends, the records do not tell us.

The question arises how thoroughly and how quickly people became reconciled to the new dispensation in matters of religion. That's a big question in national history, and I'm not going to get into it here. But the evidence for Abingdon is that the process was slow. John Roysse was conned in 1563 when he refounded Abingdon School. If you look at the school rules of the time, it is plain that what he thought he was getting for his money was a way round the ban on chantries. Instead of priests, he'd have schoolboys getting on their knees three times a day and praying for his soul. That's not what happened. In effect he paid for the school to be municipalised. Well into the next century, the preambles of wills of Abingdon people stick as close as they dared to the pre-Reformation formulae. Instead of invoking the Virgin and the blessed saints of heaven, it was Jesus Christ and the souls of the righteous in the same place.

The point I am trying to make is that religion had become a force for social division, not for harmony and integration. One thing we can trace reasonably well is the development of the sort of extreme protestantism that came to be known as puritanism. As early as 1558 - and that **was** early, by comparison with what happened in other places, Thomas Denton started a series of lectures, that is sermons which were sponsored by laymen and lay institutions, not by the church even if they actually happened in the church. Other such series followed. By 1577 there was a lecture in St Helens every Thursday usually given by a top-ranking Oxford scholar who was well paid for his pains. These were at two distinct levels, happening in alternate weeks. One series was at the

cutting edge of current theological developments and was directed at visiting gentry and magistrates who would be in town because Thursday was market and sessions day, and the other was much more elementary and intended to be understood by the average man or woman.

Attendance was not optional. Depending on the size of your household, you had to send one or more family members to listen to the sermons and - if they could write - take notes, and in principle they were supposed to discuss what they had heard with the rest of the household in the evening. Towards the end of the century, Sabbatarianism began to be imposed; music, games, commercial activities were forbidden on Sundays even outside the hours of the church services and sanctioned with fines.

So Puritanism tended to be authoritarian. But you didn't have to be an advanced protestant to be authoritarian. As the century wore on, the tendency was for an increasing split between the solid citizens with their sense of dignity and self-importance, and the common rout - rowdy, noisy, and often drunk. There must certainly have been class divisions in pre-Reformation towns, but the feel is that they deepened and widened in the later sixteenth century, and the élites were increasingly trying to impose their standards of behaviour on the general population. Religion might be a stated reason for attempts to discipline the anarchic tendencies of the lower orders, but it could equally be just an excuse.

So, to re-cap what I have just said, the Reformation meant a traumatic change in the collective sociability of the town. Large-scale activities that had brought all the population together were disproportionately affected, but also all those involving individuals and small groups and centred in the church had to stop. There was a sudden break in continuity and a wiping out of communal memory. People who had been respected for particular roles they played in town society suddenly found those roles had disappeared. No longer would deceased leaders of the community be remembered by the objects or equipment they had provided for the church, and nor would the ancestors of more humble people be remembered with memorial candles or named in the reading of the bede

roll. It left a sort of cognitive void that would be filled only after enough time had elapsed for a new collective history to develop and be recognised as such. A couple of generations. We'll look at that a bit more in the next section of this talk which I will now move on to, where I will discuss the governance of the town, and how that developed through the period.

A lot of recent work on urban history has emphasized the difficulty of running a newly enfranchised town. The leading men would have to take up roles of political authority for which they were totally unprepared, and it was difficult to see townsmen – merchants – as authority figures in the way than nobles and landed gentry were. In the words of a contemporary political writer, these people were 'to be ruled, not to rule others'. But this problem may not have been so acute in Abingdon as it was in other ex-monastic boroughs such as, for example, Bury St Edmunds. So far as we can see, the Abbey had long since ceased to concern itself with the details of running the town, and was content simply to receive the income from it. Back in 1484 when the Holy Cross guild had received its second charter, there were to be twelve 'masters'. Twelve men sitting round a table sounds very much like a town council, and we know that they had officials called proctors working under them. But note they didn't have anyone designated as chairman. The abbot would be unlikely to permit a mayor to emerge and contest his authority, as happened, for example, in Reading. In 1520 it was the guild, not the Abbey, that negotiated with the central government for an additional fair in Abingdon at St Andrews tide, the end of November. In a memorandum of 1555, Roger Amyce reported that the townsmen had been looking after their own affairs since 'time out of mind'. They had had their regular lawdays in the market hall, kept watch and ward, paid scot and lot - ie taxed themselves - and elected their own officials.

The first corporation after the charter in 1556 included all the four masters who survived from the guild of nine years earlier. These people were certainly not unprepared amateurs. On the contrary. The careful preparation of the charter and the clever exploitation of the property that came to the Corporation as a result of it shows a high degree of ability.

And they would already have had a degree of respect from their fellow townsfolk and from the nobility and gentry in the surroundings, many of whom will have been members of the Holy Cross in its time. Indeed, there were two landed gentlemen from outside the town who were among the first governors of Christ's Hospital, Thomas Reade and Oliver Hyde, both former members of the Holy Cross.

What did they do, apart from manipulate the housing stock that had come to them?

Their early years, especially, were very busy ones. We find them making what were probably emergency repairs to the old market hall, which doubled as the courthouse and the jail, and had probably got a bit dilapidated in the interregnum. That is presumably where they met, at first. They reorganised the market, fixed rules and charges, and ensured there were proper facilities for outside traders to come in and sell produce and meat to the town. They fixed conditions for apprenticeship, they arranged for some rudimentary policing by telling householders always to have a stout club at the ready - I suppose the idea was to quell any brawling in the street outside your house by hitting people over the head with it. If you were a 'night-walker' you were liable to be locked up until morning, when you would have to explain to the mayor what you were doing out after dark. And nobody was to give lodging to any stranger for more than three days without reporting the fact. This was immigration control, although it really doesn't look as if there was a serious problem with poor people coming in to settle - if they were looking for work, they would probably do better in the surrounding farming villages which seem to have had more need of labour.

The Corporation was also careful to enhance its own dignity, which also meant the prestige of the town in the wider world. They developed rules of procedure, including strict secrecy about their proceedings, and serious punishment for unparliamentary language in their debates. Corporation members were to distinguish themselves with special robes - these are not described anywhere, but were probably black ones, since that's what they are all wearing in later portraits, and they were to pay

the considerable sum of forty shillings on entry to the corporation to ensure no one came in who was too poor for the position. That sounds like plutocracy which we don't approve of, but remember, the access these men had to public money worked both ways. If anything happened to make a hole in the town's finances, it would be their job to plug it, and there had to be confidence that they would be able to. In fact this was never tested in the sixteenth century, though it would be in the seventeenth. But the point is that personal credit was bound up with wealth and with the sort of occupations that produced wealth. A Corporation that was open to poor men would lose dignity and thus credibility both in the town and with the central authorities like the Privy Council. The Corporation was composed very largely of traders, especially mercers and clothiers, and innkeepers.

The most significant thing they did, a few years after the charter, was to make a deal with William Blacknall, who was by then one of their members, by which they got St John's Hospital, just outside the abbey gates. They rebuilt this and made it the Guildhall, though it wasn't called the Guildhall, it was called the Yeldhall. There don't seem to have been any active guilds after the Reformation. Moving away from the old market hall, always associated with the defunct abbey, was psychologically important as a marker of the power shift that had taken place. The market hall remained, but was now administrative, no longer a centre of authority. The dungeon underneath became a tavern.

Prestige buildings were one of the ways in which towns competed with each other. Abingdon could never equal Reading in its buildings, but the Guildhall was a definite attempt. It was a working building, but also a symbol for the townspeople of the urban government that was now over them, and to the more traditional authority figures of the local region, the county nobility and gentry, that here was a new body that they would have to pay attention to. In fact the Guildhall was also a good investment. It was used for county activities - the assizes, the quarter sessions - as well as town ones, which of course brought in good business for the inns and taverns.

It does seem that the Corporation worked pretty well in the first generation after the charter - or, at least, there is no trace of any problems in the records. Succession, unsurprisingly, tended to stay in the same families. Only in the 1580s, with a second generation, did divisions begin to show in both the Corporation and in Christ's Hospital - of course it was largely the same people and families who were active in both. Factions developed, based both on family relationships and on differences in religious opinions. Groups accused each other of profiteering from property leases; and aspersions were cast on the status - financial or moral - of nominees for office. There were appeals to the Court of Chancery, appeals to the Privy Council, and an attempt was made to get the Privy Council to impose a new and different charter on the town though we don't really know what the proposed differences were. A more modern, more adversarial style of politics was coming in, and contemporaries had difficulty in dealing with it.

It may be that this high-level politicking left ordinary people in Abingdon indifferent, but I really don't think so. If your business, or your master's business, depended on a licence from the Guildhall, who was in power there was important to you.

So I'm going to finish this section, and the talk, with a mention of one of my favourite characters in the history of Abingdon - Francis Little, who was active from the 1580s and into the 1620s. It is plain when Little joins the Corporation and the Hospital because the quality of their records suddenly goes up. They begin to register details, including financial details, that they hadn't earlier. It was Little who was eventually able to resolve the difficulties that had arisen and get the Corporation and the Hospital working effectively again, and he did it with what we might call a multi-pronged approach. The main part of this was that he got the Corporation - all of it - to agree a new set of rules, almost a new constitution, which defined the way it was supposed to work. It was idealised, platonic. It described the Corporation as an assembly of wise, dignified elders, discussing the town's business in a detached impersonal way, without passion or excitement. It seems that the Corporation members were flattered to think of themselves in this way,

however far removed it was from reality, and they did manage to keep functioning in spite of their disagreements.

Little organised the rebuilding of the Long Alley almshouse and its adornment with paintings on the theme of charity, and moralistic biblical quotations. More significant, he started the process of adorning the Hospital's council chamber in the centre of Long Alley with portraits of worthies going back to the building of Abingdon Bridge by the Holy Cross guild in 1416, and forward to men and even one worthy woman - of his own time. Remember that the Holy Cross had had both brothers and sisters. It was a deliberate recasting of the history that had been fragmented by the Reformation; the master and governors at their deliberations could feel themselves under the gaze of their illustrious predecessors and in need of their approval. The break between 1548 and 1553 was erased from the record.

When, in old age, Little organised a celebration in memory of the town's benefactors, at the head of the list came Philip of Spain and Queen Mary, who had granted Abingdon its first charter, notwithstanding that they were Catholic and had Protestant blood on their hands. When he wrote his history, the earliest Abingdon history book, he made no distinction between benefactors of the pre-Reformation time and those of his own. It's worth pointing out that the criterion for a man to be noticed in Little's book was what he had done for the benefit of the town, it wasn't his distinguished land-owning lineage which of course they didn't have, and it wasn't his money-making ability, which they did have but was still regarded as not entirely respectable.

What had been going on since 1556 and on which Little was putting the finishing touches was the fashioning of a new idea, a very important idea in both Abingdon's and national political development, the idea that there could be an urban civic aristocracy that wielded local authority under the Crown, just as the landed gentry did in the countryside. This is what was happening in towns all over the kingdom. It was really only with Francis Little at the turn of the seventeenth century that Abingdon as a borough came of age.

Thank you.
Manfred Brod
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Sources and further reading:

Much of the factual material in this lecture is from Janey Cumber, 'Tudor Abingdon, the experience of change and renewal In a sixteenth century town', Oxford DPhil thesis, 2010.

The view of pre-reformation religion follows that taken by Eamon Duffy notably in *The Stripping of the Altars; Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (1992).

The choice of topics derives from the work of Robert Tittler, especially (but not exclusively) *The Reformation and the Towns in England: Politics and Political Culture, c.1540-1640* (1998).