

THE BLACKNALL LEGACY

One of the many enterprising individuals who benefited from the sale of former abbey properties after the Dissolution was William Blacknall, a miller from Swallowfield in Berkshire.

Blacknall had obtained the lease of the Abbey's dilapidated corn and fulling mills in 1548 on condition of rebuilding. In 1553 he succeeded in purchasing the whole Abbey site for £600, apart from the lead on the roof of the main gatehouse, and St. John's Hospital, which he purchased in 1555 for £94. By this time the Norman cloisters and monastic buildings had gone and only the walls of the church were still standing, together with the abbot's lodging and sundry other houses and lodgings. Roger Amyce, the King's Surveyor, in his Survey of Abingdon buildings in 1554 lists the former abbey buildings in the Base Court along Thames Street as 'a malting house, brewhouse, bakehouse, *garnet* (granary), the late chequer, a long gallery, the late carter's stable and a slaughterhouse'. The 'cosyners gatehouse standing over the myllstream' led to the Cosener's house, garden and orchard.

William Blacknall was a principal burgess and one of the first bailiffs of the new Borough in 1556. He was later twice mayor of Abingdon. The abbey site passed to his son William and grandson John (1583-1625), who was educated at Queen's College, Oxford and at the Middle Temple and was called to the Bar. He is described as a gentleman of wealth and position in the county.

Tragically, on 21 August 1625, three days after the baptism of a baby son who apparently did not survive, John and Jane Blacknall died 'at one instant of time' – of plague, according to tradition. Their younger daughter Jane died in 1626, leaving Mary heiress of the Blacknall fortune. In 1629 Mary's guardian secured her marriage to Ralph Verney, son of Sir Edmund Verney of Claydon House in Buckinghamshire. The former Abbey site passed into the hands of that family and gradually became subdivided by sale. With the inheritance went the deeds and documents of title relating to the Abbey, and the papers of the Blacknall family, including 26 Account-rolls of the Obedientiars of Abingdon Monastery from 1322-1479. It is thanks to these documents, preserved in the muniment room of Claydon House for over 200 years until their rediscovery in the 19th century, that so much information on the administration of the Abbey has survived.

Sir Ralph Verney was forced to flee into exile in France in 1643 when his father, who was standard-bearer to King Charles I, was killed at the battle of Edgehill in the Civil War. Parliament confiscated the Verney properties, and part of the old abbey site was used as a burial ground in 1644-5 when Abingdon was occupied by Parliamentary troops. The townspeople must have been glad to forget this unhappy episode in their history for the site lay forgotten until it was uncovered during excavations prior to building the Vale of White Horse District Council Offices in 1989-91. Mary Verney died in Blois, France in 1650 when conveying a pardon to her husband. The beautiful Blacknall memorial in St. Nicolas Church was not erected until 1685.

Judy Thomas
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Illustrations

Photograph of the Blacknall Memorial in St. Nicolas Church

Photograph of the Abbey Buildings at the end of Thames Street – the former bakehouse, brewhouse and granary (with the chequer chimney?) now the offices of the Friends of Abingdon and the Curator's house and Unicorn Theatre.

Sources

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