

Abingdon and the Riots of 1327¹

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IT is well known that the political troubles of 1326-27, culminating in the deposition of Edward II and the establishment of a new government under the young King Edward III, were accompanied by violent disorders in various parts of the country with particularly serious outbreaks of rioting in the monastic towns of St. Albans, Bury St. Edmunds and Abingdon. N. M. Trenholme in examining these riots suggested that they were largely due to a wave of communal feeling which was encouraged by Londoners and others, such as the citizens of Oxford, who were willing to aid and abet the inhabitants of monastic towns suffering under the oppression of their rulers.² A fresh examination of some of the evidence, however, leads to the conclusion that there was more than local communal feeling behind the riots in the towns ruled by great abbeys and behind the general disorders of the period. Anti-clericalism, and opportunism directed to national political ends both seem to have played their part, and it is these factors, especially the latter, which it is hoped to elucidate here, looking first at the Abingdon riots and the local conditions which formed the background to them.

Abingdon in the early 14th century was a small but flourishing wool town. The leading inhabitants were prosperous merchants and clothiers, energetic in the pursuit of their own interests and resentful of the power wielded by the neighbouring abbey, particularly in the organization of markets and fairs and the levy of trading dues in the town. Abingdon Abbey itself was still one of the greatest Benedictine houses in England: it was under royal patronage, its head was a mitred abbot, and it was richly endowed with lands and other forms of income, not least of which was the revenue derived from possession of the town of Abingdon and from the rights of jurisdiction exercised there. During the 1320's, however, the Abbey was passing through troubled times. John de Sutton (1315-22) involved his house in serious financial loss and damage, and the long and intensely bitter internal struggle which culminated in his deposition in 1322 brought the monastery into great disrepute. It was

¹ My thanks are due to Dr. Helen Cam for what I have learnt from her in discussions on the subject of this paper, for various useful references and for her guidance through the complexities of London politics in 1327.

² N. M. Trenholme, *English Monastic Boroughs* (Univ. of Missouri Historical Studies, Columbia, Miss. 1927), 54.

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weakened both morally and materially and was in poor shape to face the storm in the spring of 1327.

The first signal for the rising in Abingdon was the ringing of the bell of St. Helen's, the parish church, on Monday, 20 April 1327, to summon together the townsmen.³ Their object was to organize for themselves the affairs of the market place, especially the disposition of the stalls there. They were in an angry and violent mood, and the inmates of the Abbey, fearing serious trouble, prepared to defend themselves. On the night of Wednesday, 22 April, the townspeople were again summoned by the church bell, this time for a conference on the tactics of revolt. Next day they set fire to the Geldhall standing in the market place—as it was the building where the Abbey collected the townsmen's dues and held the town and market courts, it was the symbol of all that was most objectionable to Abingdonians in the monastic control of their town. This was followed up by an attack on the main gate of the Abbey itself, which was answered by a retaliatory expedition on the part of the armed defenders of the Abbey from within the precinct. A violent conflict broke out, two of the townsmen were killed, others fled, while many were taken captive and imprisoned in the Abbey until they could be dealt with by the king's justices. Many more were induced to give themselves up. The Abbot, John de Cannynge, had been absent during these events and when he returned he set free some of those who had been taken into custody; but this measure of appeasement did nothing to stop a further and more violent outbreak a few days later.

In the second phase the Abingdon riots changed their character in several significant ways. The mood was more virulent, damage was accompanied by looting, and the scale of operations was enlarged and the danger enhanced by the appearance on the scene of rioters from Oxford. Perhaps most significant of all, the leadership and initiative were taken over from the men of Abingdon by outsiders unfamiliar to the vast majority of the townspeople.

During the night of 26 April the attack was launched on the main Abbey buildings and on Abbey properties at Northcourt and Barton on the outskirts of the town. A large band of rioters from Oxford, including the mayor, leading townsmen and many scholars as well as citizens of Oxford, joined the Abingdonians and proceeded to burn and pillage the Abbey. The worst atrocities were committed the following day when Edmund de la Beche almost killed a senior monk in the Abbey church itself. Many of the monks fled and some were nearly drowned trying to cross the Thames. Resistance soon came to an end and the rioters were left free to loot the Abbey of all the valuables they could

³ This account of the Abingdon riots follows that of the so-called 'Lost Chronicle' of Abingdon, ed. H. E. Salter from extracts made by Brian Twyne: 'A Chronicle Roll of the Abbots of Abingdon', *E.H.R.*, xxvi (1911), 729-38. For the riots see pp. 731-4.

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lay hands on, and to destroy its muniments, including charters which had been deposited there by neighbouring landholders for safe keeping.

The rioters were now in command and in a position to exact concessions from the monastic government in Abingdon. The 'communitates' of Abingdon and Oxford, some three thousand strong according to the contemporary account of the riots, and under the leadership of Philip, John and Edmund de la Beche, summoned the Prior of Abingdon with the few remaining monks to attend on them in Bagley Wood, and there extorted agreement to the demands made on behalf of the town of Abingdon. The townsmen were to have their own provost and bailiffs, elected annually, who would exercise control in the town; the abbot and convent were to abandon all the rights they claimed in Abingdon by royal grants; the townspeople were to be allowed to make profitable use of the waste before their houses;⁴ and a promise was extorted that the Abbey would forego any action for damages because of the violation of the monastery by the rioters. A few days later chosen deputies accompanied by a public notary went to the Abbey to have these articles drawn up as a charter, and to have the document sealed with the common seal of the convent.

When the abbot received reports of the riots he hurried to the king and asked for legal remedy and for royal protection for the Abbey in the meantime. Then the law was set in motion; the abbot was escorted back to the Abbey by an armed guard supplied by the king, and the royal officials began to round up the malefactors. Many were captured and imprisoned, and twelve were hanged at Wallingford Castle, although the abbot intervened to save sixty others from capital punishment. Both the Abbey and the town were taken into the king's custody and thus remained for some months to come. There were repeated outbreaks and disorders for the rest of the year.⁵

The aftermath consisted mainly of a long and confused series of legal proceedings: criminal actions against disturbers of the King's peace; hangings and outlawries; actions for damages brought by the Abbey against townsmen who had looted the monastery; actions brought by local landholders for the destruction of the title deeds they had kept at the Abbey.⁶ Abbot John de Cannynge had inclined very much to leniency, but he died in 1328, and it was his successor, Robert de Garford, a man of more uncompromising and sterner ways, who prosecuted with such vigour the offenders of 1327. And it was he who in 1332 obtained a royal licence to crenellate for defence the vulnerable

⁴ *Cal. Pat. R.* 1327-30, 221-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127, 159, 202; *Cal. Close R.* 1327-30, 201, 203.

⁶ *Cal. Pat. R.* 1327-30, 210, 216, 288; *Cal. Close R.* 1327-30, 467, 468, 475, 514; Bodl. MS. Lyell 15, ff. 157-157v.

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buildings at the Abbey gate, St. Nicholas' Church and St. John's Hospital, which faced on to the market place of Abingdon.⁷

Without in any way underestimating the deep-rooted and continuing hostility with which Abingdonians regarded the monastic control of their town, it is possible to pick out three reasons for suspecting that outside political influences were at work during the second phase of the 1327 riots. In the first place there is reason to think that the business of the enforced charter was a 'put-up job'. The discontent simmering among the townspeople during the first quarter of the 14th century was largely due to the inauguration of St. Edmund's Fair in 1290, and the resentment felt at the tight control which the Abbey exercised over everything connected with the weekly market and the annual fairs. The townsmen's first thought, when the bell of St. Helen's rang out on 20 April 1327, was to obtain control of the organization of the market; their next step, on 22 and 23 April, was to demonstrate against the power of the Abbey to collect trading dues at the Geldhall. The whole idea of monastic control was anathema, but there is no evidence that they were sufficiently attracted by the idea of self-government to take the trouble to think out what they would put in the place of monastic control if they rid themselves of it; on the contrary, when the opportunity for extorting a charter was put in their hands by the initiative of those who had fomented the second phase of the revolt, the only positive concession they demanded was the election of their own provost and bailiffs. They could hardly have asked for less. It is as though the ingredients had been thrown together at the last moment, and at the instigation of outsiders, because a demand for a charter from one's rulers was *de rigueur* in a revolutionary movement of this kind. Moreover, there were no burgesses and no gild merchant in Abingdon to whom the borough could be farmed. The townspeople organized themselves as a community in the religious gild attached to their parish church of St. Helen, and they made do very well with that for ordinary purposes; but a religious gild could not be turned overnight into a town government.

Next one must consider the interference by the Oxford mob. Oxford was, of course, notorious for the disorderly behaviour both of its citizens and of its scholars at this period; the hooligan element there would have needed no invitation to join the fun of smashing, burning and looting in the nearby monastic town. But it was not only hooligans who took part in the Abingdon riots; many responsible and respectable citizens, the mayor, aldermen, bailiffs, town clerk and others, whose names are on record, were also involved. Did they join the mob and risk the subsequent criminal proceedings against them just because they felt sympathy for the men of Abingdon? And more

⁷ *Cal. Pat. R.* 1327-30, 547.

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remarkable still, Town and Gown had joined forces, to fight on the same side. This unprecedented and unnatural alliance could scarcely have been formed spontaneously ; what was behind it?

Lastly there has to be considered the part played by the de la Beche family — Philip, John and Edmund. The de la Beches were a Berkshire county family of the type from which sheriffs, knights of the shire, judicial commissioners and Crown officials were drawn. They had ample opportunity of finding out what the climate of opinion was in their own locality ; on the other hand they had no personal interest whatsoever in the social and economic affairs of the town of Abingdon. They had no property there, they were not themselves of the merchant class or clothiers, and there is not the slightest reason to suppose that they had any genuine and burning sympathy for the townsmen in their alleged sufferings from monastic oppression in 1327. Their interests lay very much more in national politics, in which all three were deeply involved at one time and another from 1318 onwards, even Edmund who was a cleric. Philip, the father, and John were both taken prisoner at Boroughbridge in 1322 and forfeited their lands ; John was still in the Tower of London in 1326. Edmund after being temporarily pardoned and re-arrested in 1321 as a ' king's enemy ' and adherent, like the other members of the family, of Thomas of Lancaster, managed to buy his freedom in 1322.⁸ There is a story that Edmund was implicated in a plot to release Maurice Berkeley and Hugh Audley from Wallingford Castle in 1323.⁹ The account given of the Abingdon riots in the ' Lost Chronicle ' strongly implies that it was the de la Beches who organized and led what, during the aftermath, was called a conspiracy. The words which the chronicler used, among all the derogatory epithets he might have chosen to describe Edmund, the cleric who had polluted the Abbey church with blood, are particularly significant : ' ductor et fautor et omnium malefactorum coadiutor '.¹⁰ The conclusion is almost inescapable that Philip, John and Edmund de la Beche were the organizers locally of an affair which had wider ramifications and a background of national politics as well as of sporadic anti-clericalism.

It is difficult to judge to what extent hostility to the clergy, and especially to the regulars, was a contributory factor in the disorders of 1327 and 1328. As Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Mepham certainly regarded it as a prevalent and serious problem when he came to write to the Bishop of Salisbury, in October 1328, about the excommunication of the malefactors who had been responsible for kidnapping the Abbot of Bury St. Edmunds. He expressed

⁸ *Parliamentary Writs*, II (III), 505.

⁹ J. Kirby Hedges, *History of Wallingford* (1881), I, 375.

¹⁰ *E.H.R.*, xxvi, 732.

the deep anxiety he felt because the abduction seemed to be only the latest in a series of manifestations of widespread anti-clericalism in the country at that time ; this feeling, he maintained, sprang from a deep and growing contempt for churchmen, and took the form of violent attacks on them.¹¹ One cannot doubt that he was correct in his diagnosis if, with the hindsight provided by his letter, one looks at the outstanding examples of outrages committed against ecclesiastical victims during the previous two years—the murder of Bishop Stapledon by the London mob in October 1326, the riots at Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans in January 1327 and subsequently, the disorders at Abingdon in April 1327, and the abduction of the Abbot of Bury in October 1328. In each of these cases the evil-doers brought excommunication down upon themselves. There was undoubtedly a feeling of contempt for the monks of Bury and of Abingdon among the general public in their own neighbourhoods. A. Goodwin speaks of ‘ a significant lack of reverence for the monkish morals ’ at Bury before the revolt of 1327.¹² At Abingdon the internal crisis of 1320-22 had brought the Abbey into great disrepute, not only in the town and the immediate neighbourhood, but also in the influential city and university of Oxford ; and the monks had then feared—rightly, as it proved in the event—the consequences which this would bring in its train.¹³ It was surely the disrespect for the monks of Abingdon that made Abingdon Abbey, rather than any other institution in the locality, the target for attack by Abingdonians and Oxonians alike in the riots of 1327.

But anti-clericalism was by no means the sole reason for the riots in monastic towns ; and in order to find a more complete explanation for what happened at Abingdon in the spring of 1327 and at Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans four months earlier, it is first necessary to turn back to the political events of the previous autumn.

Queen Isabella landed at Orwell in Suffolk on 24 September 1326, accompanied by Prince Edward, the Mortimers and a small army ; her determination was to overthrow the Despensers and if necessary her husband with them.¹⁴ She made her way through East Anglia and the Home Counties, staying at Bury St. Edmunds, Cambridge, Baldock and Dunstable,¹⁵ and then on to her own Wallingford : the castle and honour, which had once been

¹¹ Salisbury Register Martival, pt. II, ff. 232v-233. I am grateful to Mr. Christopher Elrington for allowing me to use a photocopy of his transcript of these and other relevant folios of Bishop Martival's register.

¹² A. Goodwin, *The Abbey of St. Edmundsbury* (1931), 52.

¹³ *E.H.R.*, xxvi, 736 ; *Registrum Rogeri Martival*, pt. II (Canterbury and York Soc., LVII, 1964), 348-9.

¹⁴ For the events of 1326-27 for which no other reference is given see M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford Hist. 1959).

¹⁵ *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II* (Rolls. Ser.), I (*Annales Paulini*), 313.

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Piers Gaveston's, had been made over to her in 1317.¹⁶ From there she moved to Oxford in about the third week of October. By this time she had been joined by Adam Orleton, Bishop of Hereford, an originator of the second court party in opposition to the Despensers in 1324, and one of the Queen's most valued and effective supporters. Antony Wood says that the Queen would not enter Oxford itself until she 'saw it secure'; and that while she remained outside the city at Islip burgesses came to her with a gift of 30s. This seems to have satisfied her of their good will and she thereupon took up residence at the Grey Friars in Oxford. It was during this stay, and in the presence of the Queen and the young Prince Edward, that Adam Orleton preached a rabid and treasonable sermon to the masters and scholars of the university; a shrewd blow in support of the Queen's cause. Antony Wood saw in the unrest and disaffection created by this sermon the prime cause of the disorders between the Chancellor and masters of the University and the scholars, which reputedly broke out during Lent, 1327.¹⁷ And there can be little doubt that it was during Isabella's visit to Oxford in October 1326 that the seeds were sown for that remarkable alliance between Town and Gown in the Abingdon riots six months later. Moreover the Oxford visit has to be regarded as only one episode, though an important one, in the Queen's progress across England that autumn. The journey must have provided her with an invaluable opportunity to win support for her cause in the towns and in the countryside at large, to sow disaffection in each locality in turn, and to discover what chances there might be of exploiting local unrest should it seem advantageous to do so later on.

In London, meanwhile, the King had failed to win the citizens to his side and finding his position untenable had fled to the west. The city was soon in a highly inflammatory state. On 15 October Isabella's supporters forced the somewhat lukewarm mayor, Hamo de Chigwell, to declare openly in her favour; the mob took up arms; and of the outrages which followed the worst was the lynching of a suspected spy, John Marshal, and, still more shocking, of the Bishop of Exeter as he was making his way to sanctuary in St. Paul's. A period of looting and plundering followed in which the participants earned for themselves the name 'riffles'.¹⁸ They proved a serious embarrassment to the authorities in London; the murder of Bishop Stapledon had deeply shocked ordinary law-abiding citizens and the excesses of the mob were all too likely to antagonize the more responsible type of person and lose the Queen and her party

¹⁶ *V.C.H. Berks.*, III, 526.

¹⁷ Antony Wood, *History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford* (ed. Gutch, 1792), I, 409-11; Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, I, 181. Wood's reference for the statement about the gift of money is to some Oxford City Chamberlain's accounts, and he probably obtained it from Brian Twyne's notes. The accounts themselves have, unfortunately, long since disappeared.

¹⁸ *Ann. Paul.*, 321.

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political support. There were repeated attempts to restore order: a series of proclamations was issued during the autumn to that end; the Queen sent a message shortly after the bishop's murder to forbid the use of personal violence, especially on prelates and other churchmen;¹⁹ and on 30 December every citizen had to take an oath in his ward to keep the peace, to seek no redress except by due process of law, and to bring offenders to book.²⁰

Another blow had been struck for the Queen about the middle of October, when the citizens engineered the release from the Tower of John de Eltham and the old adherents of Thomas of Lancaster who were still imprisoned there—among them John de la Beche. The released prisoners were required to take an oath to make common cause with the City. The Queen in writing to thank the Londoners for their achievement at the Tower asked that all the ex-prisoners should be sent to her under safe-conduct with the exception of John de la Beche, who was presumably to stay on in London.²¹

The Queen spent Christmas at Wallingford and moved to London in January: the King was in custody at Kenilworth. Events were now moving to a climax, with Parliament summoned for 7 January and London set to play its influential, if not decisive, part in the political crisis which followed. On 13 January a large gathering was assembled at the Guildhall composed of representatives of all estates of the realm and including thirty burgesses from the Cinque Ports, five from Bury St. Edmunds and thirteen from St. Albans. Among the 'Knights and Serjeants of the Court' were Philip and John de la Beche.²² All present took an oath to support the Queen and the Prince, and to maintain the freedom of the City. There were political sermons from the Bishops of Hereford and Winchester and finally from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who on 15 January declared the King to be deposed. Edward II abdicated at Kenilworth on 20 January.

The oath-taking at the Guildhall precipitated a second train of events, for rioting broke out in the monastic towns of Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans immediately afterwards, on 15 January. The chroniclers of these two abbeys make it clear that the provincial risings were strongly influenced by London.

¹⁹ This is reported in a letter from Archbishop Reynolds to Prior Eastray of 21 October 1326—'Mandavit eciam dicta domina nostra civibus London' quod nulli huiusmodi viventi maxime prelati aut viris ecclesiasticis, sint molesti [sic.] eos qualitercumque ledendo, aut ipsis iniurias irrogando, paucis personis nominatim expressis, de affinitate, consanguinitate vel adherencia domini Hugonis Dispens' dumtaxat exceptis...': *Historical MSS. Commission Reports, Various Collections*, 1. 272-3. I am indebted to Dr. Kathleen Edwards for drawing my attention to this letter.

²⁰ *Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, ed. A. H. Thomas, 11. Thus, this oath-taking ward by ward was not, as G. A. Williams implies, part of an attempt by Londoners to create 'a sworn commune' to depose Edward II: *Medieval London: From Commune to Capital* (Univ. London Hist. Studies, xi, 1963), 297.

²¹ *Plea and Mem. R.*, 42.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

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They both lay great stress on the effects in other towns of London's example ; on the close ties, amounting almost to confederation, between the citizens of the capital on the one hand and the townsmen of Bury and St. Albans on the other, resulting from the Guildhall oath ; and on the previous indoctrination of the townsmen by Londoners, encouraging them to rise against their masters.²³ But to say that Londoners were sent to the two towns as agents for encouraging the burgesses to revolt (as Trenholme maintains) ; or that London 'paraded itself as leader of the movement' (as Dr. Gwyn Williams suggests) may be reading more into the words of the chroniclers than their Latin will bear.²⁴ For there is no evidence that there was any general and organized communal movement. The events in London throughout the autumn of 1326 and the crisis of January 1327 demonstrate how inextricably entangled were national party politics with London local politics. Nothing could better illustrate the Janus-like attitude of Londoners than the oath-taking at the Guildhall, with its dual purpose of crystallizing political support for the Queen and the Prince on the one hand, and of binding all present to uphold the liberties of the City of London, on the other.²⁵ London politics during the two years 1326 to 1328 are most confused. The popular Hamo de Chigwell, for instance, was ousted by the Queen from the mayoralty in November 1326 in favour of the pro-Mortimer Bethune, but was restored again the following year, in spite of the fact that though Mortimer was still in full political power at Court at the expense of Henry of Lancaster, Chigwell had by then gravitated to the latter's side.²⁶ There seems to have been some connexion, at least intermittently, between the 'riffers' and Henry of Lancaster, for all those who were prosecuted for breaches of the peace at the time of the Coronation in February 1327 are identifiable as members of a troop of Henry of Lancaster's London mercenaries under the captaincy of John de Bedford. This same band of mercenaries, and also Hamo de Chigwell, were involved in the curious episode of the kidnapping of the Abbot of Bury St. Edmunds in 1328. The burgesses of

²³ *Memorials of St. Edmunds Abbey*, ed. Thomas Arnold (R.S.), II, 330 ; *Gesta Abbatum*, ed. H. T. Riley (R.S.), II, 156, 160.

²⁴ Trenholme, *Engl. Mon. Bor.*, 32, 38 ; and *American Historical Review*, VI (1901), 'The Risings in English Monastic Towns in 1327', 652, 659 ; G. A. Williams, *Medieval London*, 298. The passage from which Trenholme's statements about London agents apparently derive reads as follows : '... villani et capitosi ribaldi de villa Sancti Edmundi mane convenerunt in taberna, et edocti per malefactores London miserunt pro aliis, qui praelocuti ordinauerunt et conspiraverunt destruere et depraedari abbatiam' (*Mem. St. Ed.*, II, 330) ; though Trenholme applies it in the first place to St. Albans. The corresponding passage in the St. Albans' chronicle runs, 'Convenerunt namque . . . inferiores villae (non sine conniventia majorum ut ex post patuit) a civibus Londoniensibus, qui cunctis regni incolis perniciosum exemplum dederant, ut praefertur, sumentes exemplum perniciosum, et sese mutuo confederaverant per fidei sacramentum . . .' (*Gesta Abbatum*, II, 156).

²⁵ *Plea and Mem. R.*, 12.

²⁶ *Chronique de London* (Camden Soc. old ser. XXVIII, 1844), 55, 61 ; G. A. Williams, *Medieval London*, 297, 300.

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Bury, too, had close links with Chigwell, for they had written to him for support on at least one occasion in October 1327.²⁷

Goodwin puts forward the theory, based on the evidence of the Bury riots of 1327 and the absence of any further revolt there until 1381, that there must in 1327 have been a London organization playing a similar part to that taken by the Great Society in the Peasants' Revolt.²⁸ But the proposition that there was a communal movement organized and led by the citizens of London (which also appears to be Dr. Williams' view)²⁹ is not tenable when one tries to apply it to the 1327 riots at Abingdon, or looks more closely at the London evidence. The outbreak at Abingdon did not occur until April, four months after the first risings at Bury and St. Albans, and after the Londoners had received the new charter of March 1327, which settled most of their problems and grievances; thereafter they had little reason as a community to foster any popular movement elsewhere. Nor is there any evidence from the near-contemporary account given in the 'Lost Chronicle' of Abingdon, to show that Londoners as such took any interest in, let alone encouraged or instigated, the Abingdon revolt. Nor, again, does the evidence of the course of events support the assumption that there was any really unified popular or communal movement in London itself. We have already seen how among the governing class, for instance, there was rivalry between Chigwell and Bethune; and how the London mob, because of their excesses, threatened to become more of a liability than an asset to the authorities in the City, who had to overcome the difficulties of restoring order while concurrently fostering London's communal interests by political means such as the Guildhall oath-taking.

Yet to the contemporary mind the Abingdon rising was one in the same series as the revolts at Bury and St. Albans, and linked with the violent outbreaks of the London mob. Following the example of the citizens of London, says the chronicler of Bury St. Edmunds, 'communitates aliarum villarum ingrassati insurrexerunt contra dominos suos, sicut apud Sanctum Albanum et Abendon, et alibi'; in October 1327 the Bishop of Salisbury's registrar referred

²⁷ V. B. Redstone, 'Some Mercenaries of Henry of Lancaster, 1327-30', *Trans. Royal Historical Society*, 3rd ser. vii (1913), 154, 158, 159. The October rising at Bury was the third and worst outbreak. On this occasion the trouble was precipitated by the monks who attacked the townsmen in their parish church. The 'depraedatio abbatiae' followed. After the event the aldermen and burgesses wrote to Chigwell (then mayor) and the aldermen of London, asking for help and advice. It seems to have been moral support for their communal interests rather than any definite form of aid which they sought: Goodwin, *St. Edmundsbury*, 54; Redstone, *T.R.H.S.*, 165; M. D. Lobel, 'The 1327 Rising at Bury St. Edmunds', *Suffolk Institute of Archaeology & Natural History*, xxi, pt. 3 (1933), p. 222. Cf. G. A. Williams, *Medieval London*, 300, where he implies that this was the first rising in Bury and that the burgesses were appealing to London for leadership in their struggle against the Abbey; but the circumstances do not bear out this interpretation.

²⁸ Goodwin, *St. Edmundsbury*, 55. It is not altogether irrelevant to point out that there was no outbreak at Abingdon in 1381.

²⁹ G. A. Williams, *Medieval London*, 298, 300.

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to the Abingdon rioters who were to be excommunicated as 'ryfflatores', evidently regarding them in the same light as the London mob; and later, in February 1329, the St. Paul's annalist linked the excommunication of the London murderers of Bishop Stapledon with that of the perpetrators of outrages in all three of the monastic towns.³⁰

How, then, do the Abingdon riots fit into the general pattern which is beginning to emerge, and in particular how can their timing be explained? The answer must surely lie in the political situation after the deposition of Edward II, while he was held in captivity.³¹ A reaction against the new government set in almost immediately, with Edward of Carnarvon's adherents gathering strength and making political capital out of his sufferings. In these circumstances Henry of Lancaster was anxious to rid himself of the responsibility for Edward's custody and to shift the burden on to the Mortimers. The risky and nerve-racking business of transferring Edward from Kenilworth to Berkeley was carried through about the beginning of April 1327. Meanwhile a serious and elaborate plot was being hatched for Edward's release under the leadership of Thomas Dunhead, a Dominican friar. The supporters of the new government were aware of it, and it must have originated while Edward was still at Kenilworth. The net of intrigue and unrest was spread far and wide; as a result there was a wave of violence in the early spring of 1327, and an exceptionally large number of special commissions had to be set up to deal with the outbreaks. By the April of 1327, therefore, the political leaders who had staked their future on the continuation of the new government had good reason to feel anxious and nervous—in contrast to the Londoners who, as we have already seen, were content with the settlement of their own affairs in the March of that year. It was a moment when the politicians might well find it expedient to foster another popular rising; and when townsmen and others in a disaffected locality might take advantage of the generally confused state of affairs to stage a revolt. The men of Abingdon rose against their monastic masters on 20 April; a few days later they were joined by more important and influential allies, the burgesses and scholars of Oxford, who must themselves have been brought together for political reasons; and the de la Beches, politicians of the old Lancastrian faction, not only participated in the rising but took over its leadership from the men of Abingdon.

It is enlightening to trace the Queen's attitude in some of the events of 1326 and 1327, since she was always on the look-out, it would seem, for exploiting popular feelings for political ends. She does not seem to have had any

³⁰ *Mem. St. Ed.* II. 329; Salisbury Register Martival, pt. II, f. 219; *Ann. Paul.*, 344.

³¹ See T. F. Tout, *Collected Papers*, III, 'The Captivity and Death of Edward of Carnarvon', for an account of the political situation at this period.

objection in principle to the use of mob violence as a political weapon ; for although she evidently regarded it as politically inexpedient to countenance the excesses of the 'riffers' in 1326, at the time of Bishop Stapledon's murder, she made a specific exception of the Despensers and their followers, when instructing the Londoners to desist from personal violence, because she no doubt thought it politically safe to allow the mob to do what they liked with these unpopular characters.³² It might even be argued that she had to intervene in what was primarily a London matter because she and her followers had aroused the mob, who were now committing excessive outrages, and only she could bring it to heel again. Coventry provides a good example of the Queen deliberately courting the townsmen and setting them against their overlords. The opportunity arose in 1327 when the De Montault estates passed into her hands ; she thereupon encroached on the prior's privileges in the town by inducing the townsmen to give up attending the prior's court and to go instead to the court held by her own steward at the neighbouring manor of Cheylesmore.³³ At St. Albans the Abbey made a complete surrender under strong pressure from above of all its chartered rights to the townsmen in the spring of 1327. L. F. Rushbrook Williams has good reason for asserting that this must have been due to the interest made on behalf of the burgesses by the Queen and Mortimer, who hated Abbot Hugh, the friend of Edward II.³⁴

In the countryside at large, too, one can find instances of politics providing the motive power for transforming general ill-ease and unrest into local disorders. There were the disorders due to the plots on behalf of Edward of Carnarvon in the spring and summer of 1327. At Bury St. Edmunds a large number of the Abbey's country tenants banded together with the townspeople to take part in the riots, and some of the country gentry are even said to have given military assistance.³⁵ As regards Abingdon, a long list of rioters prosecuted in the court of King's Bench contains the names of several who can be identified as country people from nearby villages.³⁶ The disorders at Dunstable, one of the Queen's stopping places on her journey across country in 1326, which Trenholme mentions in connexion with the riots in monastic towns, seem to have consisted of attacks by country people rather than townsmen on the prior and his officers as they went about their business on their estates.³⁷ Even in 1328 the same sort of situation can be seen in Norfolk and Suffolk, where complaint was made that malefactors terrified the 'bons gentz' of the countryside, interfered with the

³² See n. 20 above.

³³ Trenholme, *Engl. Mon. Bor.*, 45.

³⁴ L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *History of the Abbey of St. Albans* (London, 1917), 149.

³⁵ Goodwin, *St. Edmundsbury*, 56.

³⁶ Bodl. MS. Lyell 15, ff. 157-157v.

³⁷ Trenholme, *Engl. Mon. Bor.*, 44.

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administration of the King's government, slandered the Queen and took oaths, 'a deffaie nostre dit seigneur le roy et ma dite dame e les gentz des grauntz villes come de seint Esmoun . . .'.³⁸ This is a particularly interesting case because while the malefactors seem clearly to have been anti-Mortimer in their sentiments, they did not exclude from their attacks the townsmen of Bury St. Edmunds who, as we have already seen, were themselves in close touch with Henry of Lancaster's supporters in London at about this time. The explanation may be that the burgesses of Bury had become tarred with the Mortimer brush at the time of the Queen's stay there in the autumn of 1326 and were still thought to be of that party even after the Mortimer-Lancaster alliance had broken up.

Politically, the general pattern for the disorders of 1327, then, is of the Queen and her immediate entourage carrying out preliminary reconnaissance and propaganda work in the autumn of 1326 in certain localities through which they passed, some of them already showing signs of disaffection; of leading politicians of the Queen's party prepared to fan the flames of popular unrest as opportunity might arise, and especially when matters were critical for them; and of townsmen in disaffected localities taking advantage of political confusion, and some degree of anti-clerical feeling, to break out against their masters or in defence of their liberties. London was, in essence, simply one of the disaffected localities ripe for exploitation in 1326; but its influence, which had for long matched its importance, was all the greater at this period because there above all other places national and local politics were so closely interwoven. It is very doubtful whether there was anything amounting to a general popular or communal movement, however, and no evidence that the politicians had worked out cut-and-dried plans for concerted action to promote a general rising. There was clearly much opportunism on both sides.

³⁸ *Select Pleas in the Court of King's Bench* (Selden Soc. vol. 57, 1938), p. cxlviii.