

Clothmaking and the Economy of Sixteenth-century Abingdon

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SUMMARY

The antiquary, John Leland, described Abingdon c. 1540 as a town that 'stondith by clothing'. The reality was somewhat different. Although cloth was made and finished in Abingdon throughout the medieval period, the town did not experience the rapid and highly profitable expansion of clothmaking found in Reading and Newbury during the late 15th and 16th centuries. Similarly, the town's trade in wool and cloth stagnated and contracted during the 16th century. This study explores the fortunes of both the cloth industry and the cloth trade in Abingdon in the 16th century and assesses their contribution to the economy of the town. The scale and impact of the production and marketing of cloth is examined through analysis of population growth, occupational structure and inventory valuations. Probate sources are utilised to explore the organisation and processes of manufacture and the structure of the cloth trade. A number of factors - ranging from the constraints imposed by Abingdon Abbey and the entrepreneurial preferences of the urban elite to the economic choices made by the town's rural hinterland and the magnetism of the London market - influenced the pattern of economic development in Abingdon. Like other towns, Abingdon faced severe political and economic problems during the middle decades of the 16th century, but survived and enjoyed renewed prosperity, thanks to the underlying resilience of its market economy and the political ambitions and commercial acumen of leading townsmen. By 1600, the town was acquiring a new reputation for its 'great trade of maulting'.

Leland's observation when he visited Abingdon in the late 1530s or early 1540s that the town 'stondith by clothing. The market is quik there' is irritatingly ambiguous.¹ Is he asserting that Abingdon has a substantial clothmaking industry or that the town is a regional marketing centre for cloth? Is his reference to the briskness of the market directed solely at Abingdon's market in cloth or is he describing the town's wider market in cloth, wool, grain, hides and other products? None of the permutations are mutually exclusive so it is perfectly possible that he sought to convey more than one of the meanings suggested. In any event, the observation raises interesting questions about the economy of early 16th-century Abingdon and particularly about the extent of the town's dependence upon clothmaking as a source of wealth and employment. The more so, because his visit - albeit of uncertain date - occurred during a period that saw the dissolution of the town's wealthy and powerful Benedictine abbey and local complaints of unemployment and poverty. The latter dated back over several decades and resulted, it has been claimed, from the decline of the town's cloth industry.² This study reviews the available evidence and seeks to explain why, and to what extent, Abingdon's once seemingly thriving cloth trade and manufactory suffered a reversal of fortune during a period when neighbouring towns with a specialist clothing function were generally expanding and prospering.

¹ L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales* (1964), i, 122.

² *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII*, xiii (1), no. 332; B.H. Todd, 'Widowhood in a Market Town, Abingdon 1540-1720' (Oxford Univ. unpubl. D.Phil. thesis, 1988), 18.

Although Abingdon continued to claim capital status for several more centuries, by the early 16th century the town had begun – albeit slowly and reluctantly – to concede both administrative and commercial primacy in northern and central Berkshire to its chief rival, Reading.³ In size and wealth, Abingdon ranked fourth among the ten towns of Berkshire in the 1520s and was barely large enough to qualify as a minor provincial centre.⁴ Like Reading, Abingdon's trade and status were enhanced by the monastic foundation it served and by a prime geographical location close to a navigable stretch of the river Thames and astride the major north-south route from the towns and cities of the north and midlands to the port of Southampton and the cross-country route between London and the ports of Bristol and Gloucester. In competition with Reading, Abingdon was perhaps disadvantaged by its somewhat isolated location close to the northern boundary of the county and beyond the Berkshire Downs. Access to London – either by road or river – was less convenient from Abingdon than from Reading.⁵ Its proximity to the neighbouring county town of Oxford may have been a further strategic and administrative handicap. Abingdon Abbey, although prestigious, was not a major centre for pilgrimage, and was declining in numbers and possibly local influence by 1500.

As a clothing centre in the medieval period, Abingdon enjoyed a range of locational advantages. Many, but not all, were shared with other local towns. High quality wool (rated as 15th out of 51 grades and joint 3rd out of 35 grades in two price schedules in the second half of the 15th century) was produced locally on the Berkshire Downs and further supplies were available from neighbouring counties, particularly Oxfordshire.⁶ The well-populated villages of northern Berkshire provided extra labour for spinning, carding and weaving, and the river Thames, with its tributary, the Ock, supplied the water needed to power the town's fulling mills and for washing and dyeing wool. Wood for the dyeing furnaces and teasels for cloth finishing were available locally, and dyestuffs and oil were readily obtainable from Southampton and London.⁷ Local clay may have been used for fulling woven cloth.⁸ The active support of the abbey enabled Abingdon to maximise its economic potential, both as a local marketing centre providing goods and services to the villages and smaller towns in its immediate hinterland and also as a regional – even national – market for wool and cloth. By the early 16th century, however, some of these locational advantages may have shrunk or deteriorated, not least as the competition for wool and semi-manufactured cloth grew and as the farming structure of the Vale of White Horse and Upper Thames Valley adjusted to

³ Whilst Leland c. 1540 described Reading as 'at this tyme the best toun of al Barkshire', Abingdon continued to claim capital status within the county, for example in its borough charter of 1556. As late as 1672, the town built a magnificent new town hall to house the county assizes. Toulmin Smith, *Leland*, i, 109; B. Challenor (ed.), *Selections from the Municipal Chronicles of the Borough of Abingdon* (1898), 1.

⁴ Calculated from the lay subsidy of 1523-7: A. Dyer, 'Ranking Lists of English Medieval Towns', in D. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, i (2000), 761-7; Todd, 'Widowhood', 22. In terms of size, wealth and market function, Abingdon can be compared with other local market towns such as Henley, Witney and High Wycombe. Dyer's study of market towns suggests that the population threshold for a minor provincial centre in the early 16th century lay in the region of 1,500-2,000 inhabitants: A. Dyer, 'Small Market Towns 1540-1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ii (2000), 425-6.

⁵ R.B. Peberdy, 'Navigation on the River Thames between London and Oxford in the Late Middle Ages: a Reconsideration', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 311-40.

⁶ E. Power and M.M. Postan (eds.), *Studies in Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (1996), 49.

⁷ K.F. Stevens and T.E. Olding (eds.), *The Brokage Books of Southampton 1477-8 and 1527-8* (Southampton Rec. Ser. xxviii, 1985), *passim*; C.A. Jackson (ed.), *The Newbury Kendrick Workhouse Accounts* (Berks. Rec. Soc. 8, 2003), *passim*.

⁸ A. Plummer and R.E. Earley, *The Blanket Makers 1669-1969* (1969), 5.

the rapidly growing demand and increased penetration of the London grain market.⁹ The economic needs and priorities of town and abbey had also diverged significantly by this date.

All towns produced cloth in the medieval period but only some developed a substantial specialisation in making or distributing cloth. Although the evidence is sparse and patchy, urban cloth production appears to have expanded during the 12th century, with some towns achieving a regional and even national reputation, for cloth woven or finished in their workshops or sold in their markets or fairs, during the course of the 13th century. Locational advantages began to exert an influence on the distribution of clothmaking during the 14th century, when commercial cloth production expanded in rural as well as urban areas.¹⁰ In common with other Berkshire towns, there is documentary evidence of weavers, fullers and dyers operating in Abingdon by the early 13th century. The abbey was clearly keen to encourage the nascent cloth industry since it provided fulling mills and later a dye-house.¹¹ By the middle of the 13th century, the industry was sufficiently prosperous and reputable to attract royal patronage. Royal accounts show that Henry III bought cloth for his household from Abingdon, as well as from larger centres such as London and Oxford.¹² Over the following two centuries, with the support and involvement of the abbey, for example in obtaining royal approval for its twice-weekly market and five annual fairs, the town developed as a marketing centre for both wool and cloth. Its week-long St. Mary's Fair was regarded as one of the great wool and cloth fairs of southern England in the medieval period, attracting both English and continental merchants as well as local producers and buyers. The abbey held extensive estates in Berkshire and Oxfordshire and was an important monastic wool producer. Wool merchants were prominent in the town from the 13th century onwards, and in 1330 Abingdon wool merchants numbered amongst those summoned by Edward III to confer with him in York.¹³ During the course of the 14th century, the growing profitability of the cloth export trade drew many villages and small towns in wool-growing areas into cloth production, and by the end of the century, Berkshire had developed a large, but comparatively shortlived, rural cloth producing area, centred on Steventon and East Hendred, and extending as far as Wantage, Welford, Bagnor, Beenham and Abingdon.¹⁴ The wool merchants and woollen drapers of Abingdon, along with those of Newbury, Reading and Wallingford, were well placed to act as middlemen for the developing rural industry.

The prosperity of Abingdon – and thus, by implication, its economic success – is demonstrated by the town's sizeable contribution to the lay taxation of 1334. Urban rankings based on the 1334 data place Abingdon at 46th, only six places behind Reading but lagging significantly behind the flourishing clothing town of Newbury which was ranked 22nd.¹⁵ The wealth and aspirations of the town's leading tradesmen are further reflected in the foundation and growth of the Guild of Our Lady and the Fraternity of the Holy Cross,

⁹ C.A. Jackson, 'The Woollen Industry in Berkshire 1500-1650' (Reading Univ. unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1993), 17, 259-60.

¹⁰ A.R. Bridbury, *Medieval English Clothmaking* (1982), 47-59.

¹¹ Berkshire Record Office [hereafter BRO], A.E. Preston, Notes on Abingdon, D/EP7/88; PRO, Rentals and Surveys, Land Revenue Miscellaneous Books, vol. 187, ff. 196-215; transcript of Roger Amyce's Survey of Abingdon for the Court of Augmentations, 1554, available at Abingdon Public Library.

¹² E. Miller, 'The English Textile Industry in the Thirteenth Century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xviii (1965), 70.

¹³ *Calendar of Close Rolls*, 1 Ed. III, 237.

¹⁴ H.L. Gray, 'The Production and Export of English Woollens in the Fourteenth Century', *Eng. Hist. Rev.* 39 (1924), 31.

¹⁵ *Cambridge Urban History*, i, 755-6.

religious guilds based at St. Helen's church, Abingdon. Although the guilds pursued religious and charitable projects, including the refurbishment, extension and beautification of the church from the late 14th century onwards and the building of the Long Alley almshouses in 1446, they also provided a focus for urban development and action. The Guild of Our Lady financed law suits against Abingdon Abbey during the long-standing conflict between town and abbey over market rights in the 14th century, and the Fraternity undertook the ambitious project in 1416-17 of building stone bridges over the Thames at Abingdon and Culham and linking them with a causeway.¹⁶ The project, as intended, drew more through traffic to the town and thus enhanced its trade, at the expense of Wallingford. It is not possible to estimate to what extent Abingdon's prosperity during the medieval period was derived from the town's production of cloth and participation in the cloth trade, because general trading and the market in wool, hides, animals and grain also contributed significantly to the urban economy. However, the timing of Abingdon's prosperity suggests that wool and cloth were the major wealth generators for leading townsmen during the medieval period.

In the absence of town records, evidence concerning the scale and success of clothing in Abingdon in the early 16th century is almost as shadowy and elusive as in earlier centuries. Aulnage records, which despite their deficiencies provide a guide to the distribution of clothmaking in the mid and late 14th century, had largely ceased by this date.¹⁷ Taxation and other national records provide bases for statistical calculation and analytical deduction but only afford limited insights into commercial and industrial achievement. Contemporary correspondence and official records relating to the dissolution of the abbey and the achievement of borough status offer contemporary comment on the economic condition of Abingdon and its cloth industry, but require careful interpretation. Probate records provide a useful source for occupational analysis, but are of limited value before the late 16th century, at which time the number of entries registered in the Archdeaconry Court of Berkshire increased significantly as more yeomen, husbandmen, tradesmen and craftsmen opted to make wills. Abingdon is fortunate to possess detailed records of baptisms, burials and marriages in the parish registers of St. Helen's from 1538, which include occupations for a significant number of burial entries, but again, the entries are most useful for the second half of the century.¹⁸ Records of debts and other disputes in national courts provide occasional, but nonetheless revealing, glimpses into the commercial dealings of individual craftsmen and tradesmen.

Evidence gleaned from the lay subsidy records of Henry VIII's reign is frustratingly inconclusive. A comparison of the urban rankings calculated from the lay taxation of

¹⁶ J. Townsend, *A History of Abingdon* (1910), 52-6; *V.C.H. Berks.* iv, 439. It is likely that the Fraternity was also responsible for the building of the town's acclaimed market cross: M.J.H. Liversidge, 'Abingdon's "Right Goodly Crosse of Stone"', in W.J.H. and M.J.H. Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays, Studies in Local History* (1989), 42-57.

¹⁷ Bridbury, *Medieval Clothmaking*, 52-3.

¹⁸ Abingdon straddled two parishes. The larger parish, St. Helen's, covered those parts of the town west of the Stert, together with the outlying hamlets of Dry Sandford, Shippon, Radley and Drayton. St. Nicholas's parish was originally created to serve abbey tenants, servants and guests and covered the east side of Stert Street, the abbey precincts, Ock Mill, Fitzharry's Manor, Barton and part of Northcourt: *V.C.H. Berks.* iv, 416. Townsend suggests that in the 16th century the population of the outlying areas of St. Helen's parish was probably only slightly larger than that of St. Nicholas's parish and that population statistics for St. Helen's therefore provide a reasonable guide to the size of the town: Townsend, *Abingdon*. St. Helen's parish registers are extant from 1538 with conspicuous gaps in 1554, 1568-70, 1574-6 and 1580-1. St. Nicholas's parish registers list marriages from 1538, burials from 1558 and baptisms from 1603.

1523-7 with those of 1334 suggests that Abingdon's relative wealth had declined from the medieval period. Unlike Reading which had moved up the rankings to 10th place and Newbury which had held its ground, Abingdon fell to 71st place in the 1523-7 hierarchy of prosperity.¹⁹ Although it is possible to argue, as doubtless with other towns of the period, that Abingdon's assessment was skewed by the vagaries of domicile, examination of the subsidy listings suggests that Abingdon's leading townsmen were not enjoying the same degree of economic success as those from Reading and Newbury.²⁰ In the subsidy listing for 1524-5, no townsmen at Abingdon were included in the highest assessment band, and the largest contributor, the clothier Thomas Braybrooke, one of 12 townsmen assessed in the second band, was only taxed on goods worth £80.²¹ At Reading 13 taxpayers were assessed in 1524-5 as owning moveable goods to the value of £100 or more (including four mercers, one clothier and two drapers) and 11 as owning moveable goods between the value of £40 and £99 (including three clothiers and two drapers).²² Braybrooke's assessment was only slightly more than one-third of the assessment of John Winchcombe, Newbury's wealthiest townsman and leading clothier, who was assessed at £230 in the Anticipation assessment lists and contributed 23% of the total tax paid by Newbury in 1525.²³ On the basis of this evidence, it does not seem unreasonable to posit that Abingdon's drapers, mercers and clothiers were not deriving the same benefit from the increased profitability of making and marketing cloth in the early decades of the 16th century as their counterparts in Reading and Newbury – or indeed in Worcester, Lavenham and other thriving clothing towns of the period. It is also interesting to note that the Fraternity of the Holy Cross successfully petitioned Henry VIII in 1520 to hold an extra fair in the town, and to speculate whether they were driven to do so by the need to generate extra revenue to support their public obligations in the town.²⁴

The condition of Abingdon's clothing workforce is more difficult to ascertain from the subsidy listings. Calculation of the population of Abingdon based on the subsidy assessments of 1523-7, taking the highest number of contributors found in any one instalment of the subsidy (130) and using Dyer's multiplier of 6.5, suggests a population for Abingdon of c. 900 in the 1520s.²⁵ This is problematic because it appears low compared with later trends.²⁶ Unless further research uncovers significant push-pull factors in the local economy encouraging substantial migration to the town from the mid 1520s onwards, it seems likely that using a standard multiplier underestimates the number of townsmen below the

¹⁹ *Cambridge Urban History*, i, 765-6.

²⁰ The prominent woolman, moneylender and abbey steward, John Audlett, lived outside the town boundary and was assessed in the neighbouring manor of Barton: J. Dils (ed.), *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* (1998), 42.

²¹ Todd, 'Widowhood', 22.

²² N.R. Goose, 'Economic and Social Aspects of Provincial Towns: A Comparative Study of Cambridge, Colchester and Reading c.1500-1700' (Cambridge Univ. unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1984), 90. These figures may underestimate the prosperity of cloth manufacture in Reading since not all occupations are known.

²³ PRO, Exchequer Lay Subsidy Returns, Newbury, 1524-5, E179/73/132, E179/73/124. I am indebted to Mrs. J. Dils for the use of her transcript.

²⁴ *V.C.H. Berks.* iv, 439. The townsmen of Abingdon had long complained that they were overburdened with fairs.

²⁵ Todd, 'Widowhood', 22; A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns 1400-1640* (1991), 39.

²⁶ See below p.65.

threshold for the subsidy.²⁷ Todd suggests that more than half of Abingdon's population may have fallen below the threshold.²⁸ The early 1520s were certainly a difficult period for urban wage earners and it is possible that Abingdon had been struggling for a decade or more to find employment for poor migrants. A succession of three bad harvests in 1519-21 caused national hardship and pushed food prices up steeply, particularly in 1521-2.²⁹ Wolsey's European entanglements caused a plunge in cloth exports in 1521-3 and led directly to lay-offs in clothing districts. Even when overseas trade recovered, the return to pre-1521 production levels would not have been immediate due to the need to off-load stockpiled cloths. Such problems may have intensified the impact of unemployment upon Abingdon's subsidy assessments.³⁰

Correspondence relating to the dissolution of the abbey in 1538 throws unexpected light on the condition of clothmaking in Abingdon during the middle decades of Henry VIII's reign, and tends to confirm the picture of an urban economy struggling to combat unemployment and poverty. Following the peaceful surrender of the abbey, Sir Richard Rich, one of the commissioners for the Court of Augmentations, arrived to assess the prospects of the abbey site as a potential royal residence. He rejected it as unsuitable and his report to Thomas Cromwell drew attention to the decay of both the town and the abbey. He further advised that the town was likely to decline unless the people were set to work to 'drape cloth', and reported that Tucker, a clothmaker from Burford, was willing to spend 100 marks a week to provide employment in clothmaking in Abingdon in return for the grant of the abbey fulling mills, the floodgates, the fishing and a farm called the Rye, at rents as surveyed.³¹ Tucker, it was noted in a further letter to Cromwell from Thomas Cade, was already constrained to send wool to Abingdon for carding and spinning but had undertaken to 'set the inhabitants of Abingdon to work if they would work, so that they would gain more wages in a few years coming than in 20 years past'.³² Rich's personal interest, any bribes notwithstanding, was to create employment for the growing number of poor in the town, but the fact that an entrepreneurial clothier had moved quickly to purchase part of the abbey site for manufacturing purposes is not surprising. English clothmaking was expanding rapidly during the 1530s, seemingly barely able to satisfy continental demand. During the same period William Stumpe purchased monastic property at Malmesbury to accommodate and expand his clothing business and in 1546 attempted, less successfully, to develop a satellite operation at Oseney Abbey, Oxford.³³ What is surprising is the implication that Abingdon's own mercantile and industrial capitalists were not able or willing to generate sufficient employment in the town and that, so far as it is known, none of them came forward with a similar scheme. The reluctance, or failure, of the town's drapers and clothiers to capitalise on the profitability of the European cloth trade suggests that they had other economic priorities. Thomas Braybrooke,

²⁷ Wordie discounts enclosure as a cause of population increase in early 16th-century Abingdon but other possible factors include the development of efficient farming practice in cereal production, the engrossing of farms, the availability of charity in Abingdon and the perception that more employment opportunities existed for individuals and families in towns. The fluctuating attractions of other local towns, such as Reading, Newbury, Wallingford, Oxford and Witney during the period also played a part: R. Wordie (ed.), *Enclosure in Berkshire 1485-1885* (Berks. Rec. Soc. 5, 2000), pp. xxvi, xxx; J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects* (1979), 164.

²⁸ Todd, 'Widowhood', 22.

²⁹ W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder* (1976), 86.

³⁰ The point cannot be pushed too far, however, since a sizeable proportion of Abingdon's population was employed in agriculture.

³¹ *Letter and Papers of Henry VIII*, xiii (1), no. 332. The term drape was used to describe weaving during this period.

³² *Ibid.* no. 415.

³³ Toulmin Smith, *Leland*, 132; *VC.H. Berks.* iv, 110.

for example, appears to have retired from the industry and purchased land.³⁴ In the event, Tucker's scheme was never realised and clothmaking appears to have continued to stagnate, since the fulling mill, described as decayed in 1538, though operating at a profit in 1531-4, had not been repaired when Thomas Blacknall, a miller, leased much of the abbey site in 1548.³⁵

Town charters, like individual petitions for patronage, are prone to overstatement. It is therefore possible that the claims made by leading townsmen in 1556 that Abingdon was 'inhabited by many poor people and is in so great ruine and decay for want of repairing of the houses... that it is very likely to come to extreme calamity' were exaggerated.³⁶ However, it is almost certain that in mid-century Abingdon, as elsewhere, the leading men of the town were struggling to cope with the economic uncertainty and difficulties caused by a sustained period of rapid price inflation, a decade of exorbitant taxation and currency debasement, a growing and increasingly under-employed population, a calamitous slump in the Antwerp cloth market and the day-to-day consequences of a severe cycle of dearth and disease. The extent of the demographic crisis can be readily demonstrated. A census return made to Cardinal Pole in 1555 suggests that the population of Abingdon was around 1,400 at this date, but it seems likely that the town's inhabitants had shrunk in number from the 1540s.³⁷ Evidence from St. Helen's parish registers (see Fig. 1) suggests that the birth rate was high in the late 1530s and early 1540s, and calculations based on a decadal count of baptisms suggest that the population of the town may have exceeded 1,550 during the decade, particularly if, as seems probable, significant immigration was occurring from rural areas.³⁸

The situation of Abingdon's wage-dependent population in the 1540s and 1550s, as in the 1520s, was undoubtedly extremely difficult. A severe visitation of the plague in 1545-6 was succeeded by famine. The years 1549-51 saw a run of deficient and bad harvests followed by an extremely poor harvest in 1555 and dearth in 1556. A further epidemic, probably influenza, swept the town during the years 1557-8.³⁹ The impact of these difficulties is clearly visible in St. Helen's parish register. The number of baptisms recorded in the 1550s is almost half the number recorded in the 1540s and 1560s. The number of marriages recorded similarly falls sharply 1549-57, reaching a low of six in 1556 compared with an average of 17 per annum in the 1530s and 1540s. The number of burials recorded was higher in the 1540s (due partly to the extremely high mortality of 1545) than in any other decade in the century and exceeded the number of baptisms by almost 100. Although mortality fell in the 1550s, the excess of burials over baptisms during the decade rose to over 150. The reduced mortality appears to reflect the lower birth rate of the period and perhaps

³⁴ PRO, PROB 11/29 (P.C.C. 1 Spert).

³⁵ Todd, 'Widowhood', 46.

³⁶ Challenor, *Municipal Chronicles*, 1.

³⁷ Lost manuscript quoted in D. and S. Lysons, *Magna Britannia* (1806-22), i, 223. The census return covered only St. Helen's parish, but see above note 20. Analysis of Amyce's Survey, 1554, which named 295 property holders (with those known to be non-resident deducted), similarly yields a mid-century population of c. 1,400 for Abingdon if a multiplier of 4.75 is used to represent average household size: Todd, 'Widowhood', 22.

³⁸ Abingdon Public Library, Canon Oldfield's Index to St. Helen's parish regs. vols. 1 and 2. Though the use of parish registers for demographic purposes is not entirely satisfactory due to periodic losses of data, inconsistency in the standard of registration (particularly with reference to the under-registration of baptisms), and the inevitable distortion caused by migration (which provides burials but not baptisms), parish register counts provide a useful indication of the natural increase in population. For use of decadal count of baptisms see N.R. Goose, 'Decay and Regeneration in Seventeenth-Century Reading: A Study in a Changing Economy', *Southern History*, v (1984), 71.

³⁹ Hoskins, *Plunder*, 86; P. Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (1985), 58, 71.

⁴⁰ Parish regs., St. Helen's and St. Nicholas.

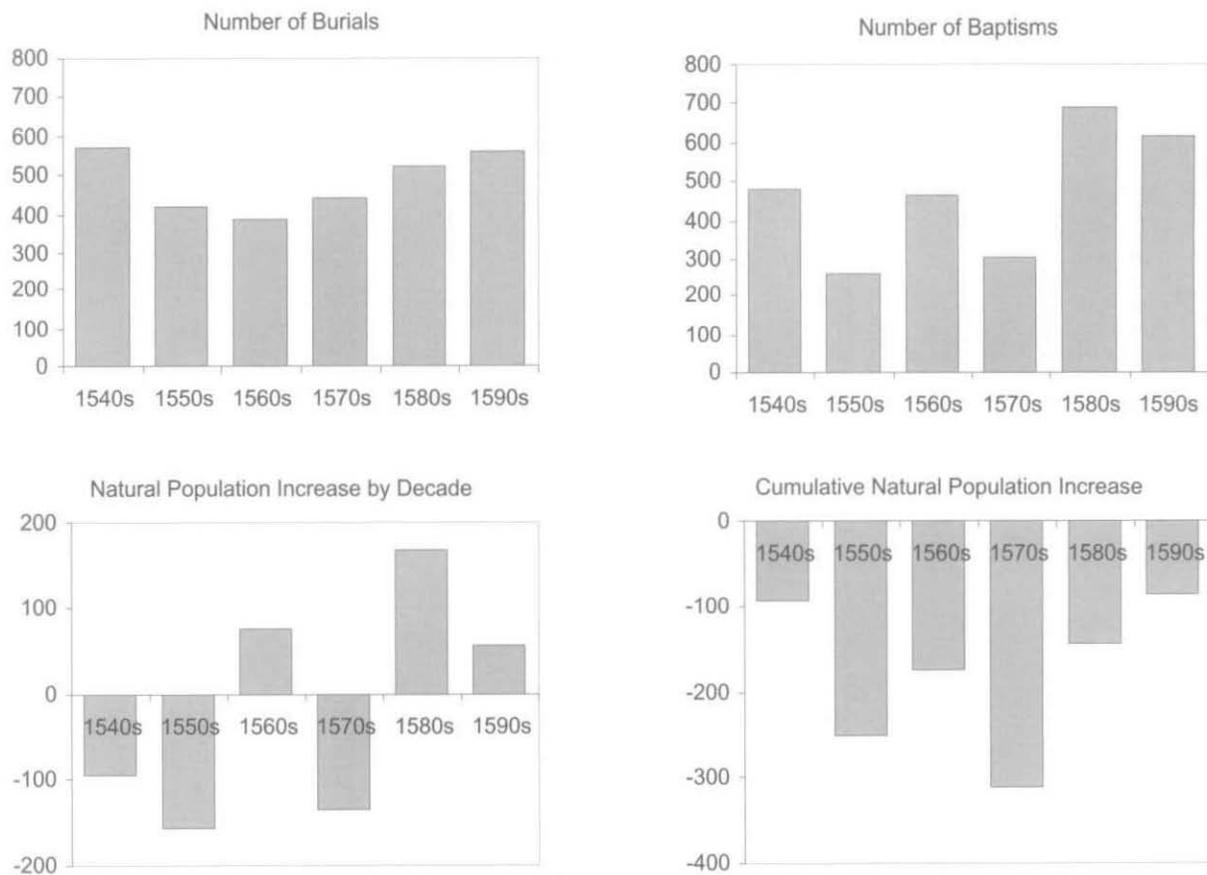


Fig. 1. Changes in population: Abingdon 1540–99. Source: St. Helen's parish registers. Significant gaps noted in 1554, 1568–70, 1574–6, 1580–1.

also a fall in immigration, an increase in emigration and the cumulative Darwinian impact of disease and malnutrition.⁴⁰ Examination of Roger Amyce's survey of town properties, undertaken 1554, suggests that the number of properties in the town remained relatively static from the 1530s to the 1550s, adding further weight to the argument that the population rise of the 1530s and 1540s was short-lived.⁴¹

The dissolution of the abbey in 1538 and the town's religious guilds in 1547 clearly exacerbated the situation. Whilst in the long term the political and economic freedom achieved post-1538 brought benefits to the town, and particularly to its more prosperous and ambitious inhabitants, in the short run the government and economy of the town suffered. Even allowing, once again, for exaggeration, the deterioration experienced or anticipated in local services is clearly evident in the 1553 charter of incorporation for Christ's Hospital. The institution, it was argued, was required 'as well for sustaining poor and indigent persons there as for the maintaining and repairing of four bridges contiguous to the aforesaid town of Abingdon... and on the repairing of the king's highway leading... towards Dorchester'.⁴² Furthermore, the hospital's rental income, like that of the town, was adversely affected in the 1550s and 1560s by the poor condition of many of the properties granted to finance its work, and only increased later in the century when renovation and rebuilding had been undertaken.⁴³ Once economic conditions improved, and with its infrastructure safeguarded and self-government achieved, the underlying resilience of the town's market economy and the proximity of London ensured the continuing prosperity of the urban elite. As a market town with a growing trade in livestock and grain and as a service provider to a thriving rural hinterland, Abingdon benefited during the 16th century from price inflation and from the capital's rapidly expanding market for foodstuffs.⁴⁴ The dissolution of the abbey and religious guilds created opportunities for investment in land and property, and the resulting gentrification of the area generated new trade and employment opportunities. The town was also well placed to benefit from the renewed growth and vitality of Oxford during the second half of the 16th century.⁴⁵ However, as in other towns, the period saw a growing polarisation between wealthy townsmen and the employed and unemployed poor, aggravated by continuing migration from the countryside and an under-developed industrial sector.

Population growth resumed in Abingdon from the late 1550s, achieving a natural increase in the town's population during the 1560s of over 60 (Fig. 1). The upward trend continued for the remainder of the 16th century, despite high mortality levels during the 1580s and 1590s.⁴⁶ Calculations based on a decadal count of baptisms suggest that the number of inhabitants exceeded 2,000 during the 1580s, but dipped below 1,900 following the high mortality of the 1590s. Todd estimates, from calculations based on contributions to the parish rate of 1606, that the population of the town again exceeded 1,900 by the early 17th century.⁴⁷ Migration contributed significantly to the increase. As in the early 16th century, population growth went hand in hand with unemployment and poverty. Although the economy was prosperous, there was insufficient work for the poor. William Blacknall's

⁴¹ Abingdon Public Library, Transcript of Amyce's Survey.

⁴² J. Carter and J. Smith, *Give and Take, Scenes from the History of Christ's Hospital Abingdon 1553-1900* (1981), 2. Christ's Hospital was effectively founded to continue the public works previously undertaken by the Fraternity of the Holy Cross.

⁴³ M. Cox, *The Story of Abingdon* (1993), iii, 5-7.

⁴⁴ E.J. Fisher, 'The Development of the London Food Market, 1540-1640', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 1st ser. v (1934-5).

⁴⁵ Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, 54.

⁴⁶ Abingdon Public Library, parish regs.

⁴⁷ Todd, 'Widowhood', 25.

project to manufacture sailcloth proved unsuccessful.⁴⁸ In 1561, the corporation complained that freemen were leaving the town in search of employment.⁴⁹ The mayor and burgesses, like their predecessors, saw clothmaking as a useful means of employing the poor. In 1579, Christ's Hospital agreed to loan £40 to provide materials for the poor to be set to work spinning.⁵⁰ In 1610, the corporation agreed that the freemen of the town should be allowed to monopolise the yarn trade in the market in order to provide work for the poor.⁵¹ Private charity, as in other towns, began to focus on the need to provide training and employment for the able-bodied poor; for example in 1557, Katherine Hyde of Sutton Courtenay, widow of the wealthy clothier, Thomas Braybrooke, left £100 to be used as a loan fund for Abingdon's clothiers in order that poor spinners, weavers and fullers 'might allwaies the better be sett on work'.⁵²

A study of probate entries from Archdeaconry, Consistory and Prerogative Court records provides direct evidence of economic recovery and comparative economic success in Abingdon during the late 16th and early 17th centuries.⁵³ Analysis of the gross inventory valuations recorded for Abingdon's probate entries during the period 1550-1649 suggests that there was growing prosperity in the town from the late 16th century onwards (see Fig. 2). Although inflation clearly played a part, and due allowance needs to be made for the small number of inventory valuations available and the vagaries of chance in their survival, plotting median and mean inventory valuations by decade clearly demonstrates the overall upward trend. The results are particularly interesting when compared with those for Reading and Newbury. Reading's median and mean valuations exhibit a similar upward trend from the late 16th century onwards but are frequently slightly lower than those for Abingdon. Newbury's valuations fluctuated at a lower level throughout much of the period and only show a sustained rise from the 1620s. The depressed condition of the town's economy from the 1560s onward is clearly visible. For all three towns, the median provides a useful, if crude, indication of the movement and level of average prosperity whilst the mean provides an even cruder indication of the overall movement and level of prosperity. Minimum inventory valuations remain low (generally around £1 or £2) throughout the period for all three towns, providing a reminder of the poverty at the bottom end of the social scale.

An analysis of the occupational structure of Abingdon during the period 1540-99, using occupations recorded or deduced for probate entries, reveals an urban economy heavily dependent upon agriculture, but with a substantial retail function and with a more marked

⁴⁸ J. Bruce (ed.), *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family* (Camden Soc. lvi, 1853), 90-2.

⁴⁹ Todd, 'Widowhood', 24.

⁵⁰ Carter and Smith, *Christ's Hospital*, 5.

⁵¹ Todd, 'Widowhood', 46.

⁵² BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/2/269.

⁵³ For the purpose of the study, manuscript wills and administrations, together with register copies of those which have not survived, filed in the court of the archdeacon of Berkshire, the Consistory Court of the bishop of Salisbury and the Prerogative Court of Canterbury were examined. It has been suggested that only the most prosperous 10% of the population left wills, but evidence from Newbury indicates that once women and children are disregarded, the proportion may be higher and varies considerably from year to year (and possibly from location to location): D. Dymond and A. Betterton, *Lavenham, 700 Years of Textile Making* (1982), 6; Jackson, 'Berkshire Woollen Industry', 39.

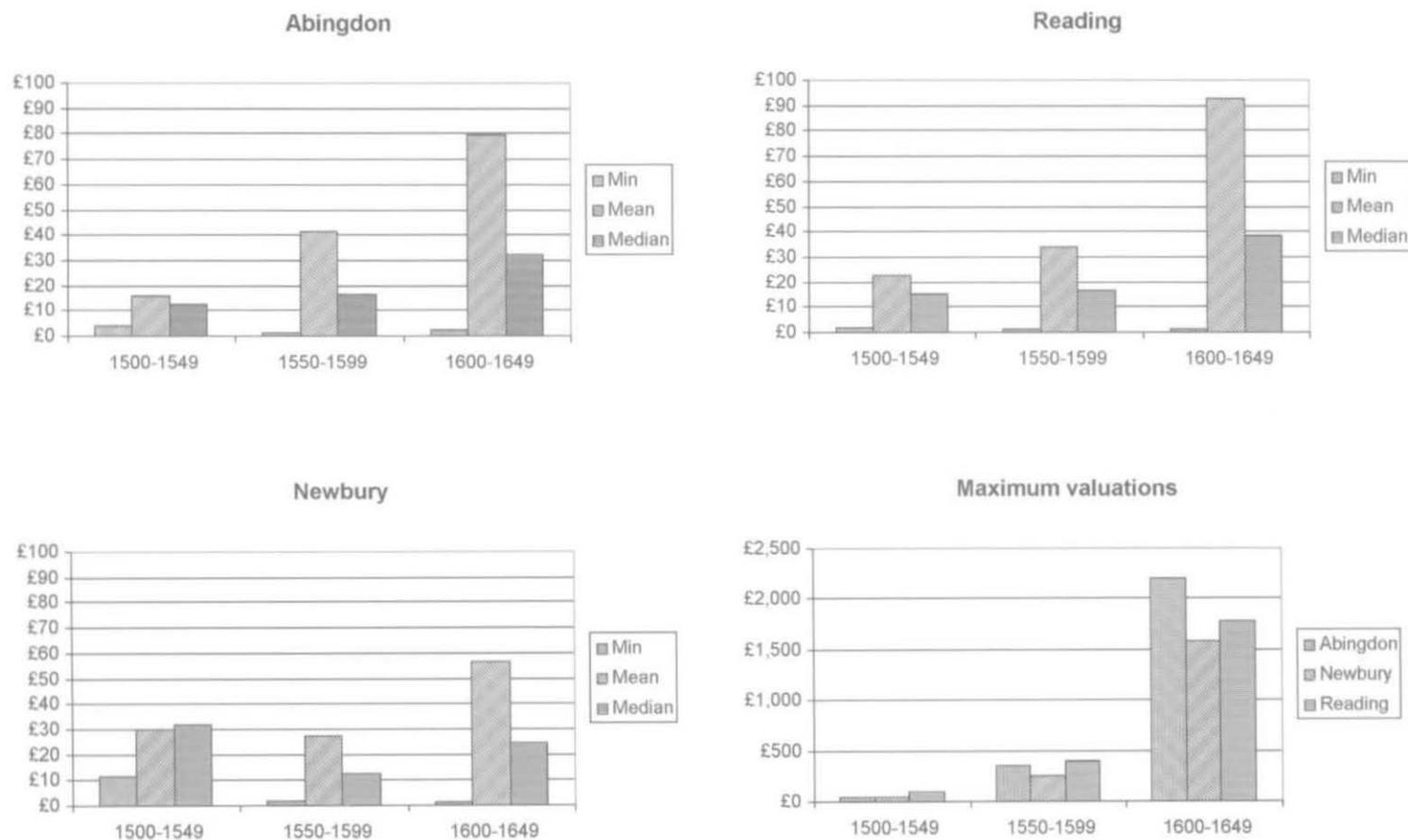


Fig. 2. Comparison of gross inventory valuations for Abingdon, Reading and Newbury 1500–1649. Source: probate documents filed in the Consistory Court of the bishop of Salisbury and the court of the archdeacon of Berkshire.

TABLE 1. ANALYSIS OF THE OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF ABINGDON 1540-1629

Category	1540-69	1570-99	1600-29
Agriculture	13 (35%)	22 (35%)	30 (24%)
Victualling Trades	4 (11%)	5 (8%)	21 (17%)
Distribution Trades	9 (25%)	8 (12%)	7 (6%)
Building Trades		3 (5%)	12 (9%)
Woodworking Trades		1 (2%)	4 (3%)
Metalworking Trades	1 (3%)	1 (2%)	5 (4%)
Leather Trades	4 (11%)	9 (14%)	17 (13%)
Cloth Trades	2 (6%)	2 (3%)	10 (8%)
Garment and Hat-making Trades	1 (3%)	4 (6%)	9 (7%)
Transport		1 (2%)	5 (4%)
Professional Occupations and Services	2 (6%)	6 (9%)	4 (3%)
Domestic Servants and Labourers		1 (2%)	2 (2%)
Total	36 (100%)	63 (100%)	125 (100%)

Source: wills proved and administrations granted in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Consistory Court of the bishop of Salisbury and court of the archdeacon of Berkshire

industrial specialisation in leatherworking than in clothmaking (Table 1).⁵⁴ Over a third, 35% of the total, was employed in agriculture. A mere 4% was employed in clothmaking whilst 13% were leatherworkers. The victualling trades provided employment for 9%. These findings contrast sharply with those for the neighbouring clothing towns of Reading and Newbury, where in the late 16th century 28% and 41% respectively of the occupational sample were employed in the woollen industry and only some 10-13% in agriculture and the victualling trades. Even in the first half of the 17th century, when clothmaking was struggling in Reading and clearly declining in Newbury, 33% and 35% respectively were employed in clothmaking.⁵⁵ At Abingdon in 1600-29 the proportion employed in

⁵⁴ In producing the analysis, only the occupation of the testator or intestate was used. The categorisation of occupations is not based upon a single criterion (type of raw material used, type of good produced or type of activity involved) but on an amalgamation of all three. This allows a common-sense approach to categorisation and facilitates comparison with other major studies. While it has to be admitted that the probate sample used is small, biased towards the higher social classes, hindered by the loss of inventories for Prerogative Court of Canterbury entries (although some survive because they were also filed in the Archdeaconry Court), and represents only a small fraction of the number of burials recorded during the period, the analysis provides a valuable indication of concentration and trends. Inevitably some allowance needs to be made for the lagged effect of utilising probate evidence but the distortion is less significant in a society where early death was common.

⁵⁵ Jackson, 'Berkshire Woollen Industry', 39-42, 168.

clothmaking had increased to 8% whilst those employed in agriculture had fallen to 24% and leatherworking remained static at 13%. The most significant trend identifiable in Abingdon by 1600, however, was the decline of the distributive trades, particularly the reduced number of drapers and mercers, and the expansion of the victualling trades due to the rapid growth of grain dealing and malting in the town. In the late 16th century, 13% of Abingdon's probate sample were drapers and mercers, compared with 2% in Reading and 3% in Newbury. By the early 17th century the proportion had dropped to 4% whilst the figures remained relatively constant in Reading and Newbury. By the early 17th century, 4% of Abingdon's probate sample was described, or can be identified, as maltsters, pushing up the proportion for the victualling trades to 17%. The proportion rose rapidly over the following decades, exceeding 8% for the period 1600-49. Examination of the burial records for St. Helen's parish 1538-96 largely corroborates this picture of the degree of industrial specialisation found in the town. Occupations were recorded for 184 of the men buried during the period. Of these, 9% worked in the woollen industry (2 clothiers, 2 dyers, 9 weavers and 3 fullers) and 17% in leatherworking.⁵⁶ The higher figure for the cloth industry reflects the more urban nature of employment in St. Helen's parish compared with St. Nicholas's parish where many were employed in agriculture. However, it may also indicate that some clothworkers – particularly weavers – were too poor to bother with wills.

Examination of individual probate entries provides further evidence of the stagnation of clothmaking in the town but disappointingly few details of the organisation of manufacture and the cloths produced. There are only three probate entries for weavers during the 16th century and one for a fuller. The earliest weaver's entry is for Roger Cook in 1567. This includes a detailed inventory, with a gross valuation of £19 15s. 3d., which reveals that he lived in a substantial house (in need of repair) with a shop and a workshop containing two broadlooms, two spinning wheels and a stockarding frame.⁵⁷ William Horton's inventory, taken in 1583, was valued at £5 4s. 0d. and lists neither workshop or trade goods.⁵⁸ No inventory has survived for the weaver Christopher Duckworth who died in 1585, but the recorded valuation of £38 19s. 6d., together with other evidence, suggests that, like Roger Cook, he was a master weaver.⁵⁹ A number of early 17th-century weavers' inventories contained no looms or working tools, for example those of Edward Hobbs, 1625, with a gross inventory valuation of £4 3s. 2d. and John Houlton 1628, of £3 4s. 2d.⁶⁰ John Tanner's inventory, taken in 1618 and valued at £10 11s. 8d., lists two narrow looms and their appurtenances.⁶² As in Reading and Newbury, one or two linen and coverlet weavers had emerged in Abingdon by the early 17th century.⁶²

The fuller Richard Smith, who died in 1583, commanded an inventory valuation of only £4 15s. 0d., but evidence from the early 17th century suggests that, as in Reading and Newbury, the cloth finishing trades at Abingdon yielded substantially greater profits for master craftsmen than weaving.⁶³ Robert Werg's inventory valuation was recorded as

⁵⁶ St. Helen's and St. Nicholas's parish regs.

⁵⁷ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/52/7ab.

⁵⁸ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/10/389.

⁵⁹ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/11/34.

⁶⁰ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/195/51; D/A1/79/15ab.

⁶¹ BRO, MS Wills Berks. DA1/127/45ab.

⁶² E.g. Titus Arnold, linen weaver, will and inventory, 1643 (son of the weaver William Arnold who died 1629) and Francis Clements, coverlet weaver, will and inventory 1621: BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/36/182ab; D/A1/54/73a.

⁶³ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/10/417.

£199 4s. 5d. when his will was proved in 1600.⁶⁴ John Woodruffe's inventory, taken in 1603, was valued at £86 13s. 8d. and describes a substantial house with mill, lofts and a backside used for tentering cloths. His working tools included eight pairs of shears, two shear boards, 17 sets of handles, eight pairs of burling irons, one press and one rack. He clearly provided a complete wet and dry cloth finishing service. In Reading and Newbury by this date, higher production levels and greater pressure for top quality workmanship had led to a greater specialisation and division of labour within the trade. Although the number of clothworkers operating in Abingdon was never large, the town appears to have acted as a specialist cloth finishing centre for the local area. The debts recorded in Woodruffe's shop book amounted to £44 9s. 4d. and included money owed by Mr. Stevens of Wallingford, as well as by Henry Mayle and Robert Payne of Abingdon, for milling cloth.⁶⁵ The fulling millers, William and Henry Jerom, whose inventories were appraised in 1641 and 1644, operated a fulling house and fulling mill and were rated at £188 13s. 8d. and £121 6s. 4d. respectively.⁶⁶

Although the evidence is far from conclusive, it seems likely that dyeing remained a specialist occupation in Abingdon throughout the period. In Reading and Newbury, dyers monopolised the dyeing of cloth, but clothiers were allowed to dye wool. Despite the large output of the two towns there were few dyers because most cloth was dyed in the wool in order to avoid uneven colouring due to the hardness of local water supplies. The absence of any clothiers' inventories for Abingdon prevents direct confirmation of the point, but the presence of two dye-houses in a town with a small output controlled by mercantile capitalists and independent craftsmen, and the considerable capital investment required to equip a dyehouse, suggest that vertical integration of the two stages of manufacture did not take place, or was at least uncommon, in Abingdon. It should not be assumed, however, that cloth woven in Abingdon was dyed in the piece rather than in the wool. It seems likely that, as in Reading and Newbury, dyers dyed wool, yarn and cloth.⁶⁷ No probate entries for Abingdon dyers have survived for the 16th century but entries from the 17th century confirm evidence from other sources that there were two dyehouses operating there during the 16th and 17th centuries, including a dyehouse originally owned by the abbey in East St. Helen's Street.⁶⁸ Unfortunately only John Cronie's will of 1629 has survived to indicate his considerable prosperity, but a detailed inventory taken of Gilbert Taylor the elder's property in 1639 is highly informative.⁶⁹ Taylor ran a substantial business with both a dyehouse and shop. His dyehouse contained two copper furnaces (one great and one small), a brass vat and three woad vats. The copper furnaces were valued at £25 and the remainder of his dyeing equipment at £6. He was thus, as the presence of the dyes and mordants, madder, brazil, redwood, cochineal, galls, wood wax, coppris, allum and woad to the value of £69 also indicates, able to produce a wide range of colours. Interestingly, the presence of madder, brazil, redwood and cochineal suggest a preference for red shades. Taylor lived in a large and affluently furnished house and attracted a gross inventory valuation of £325 12s. 0d. His business organisation and prosperity compare well with that of Thomas Gately of Reading (died 1617 with a gross inventory valuation of £285 17s. 0d.) but neither reached the meteoric heights of Benjamin Houghton of Newbury, who operated dyehouses in both Newbury and Marlborough and whose inventory was valued at £1,583 11s. 0d. in 1637.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ BRO, MS. Wills Berks. D/A1/13/561.

⁶⁵ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/220/195a.

⁶⁶ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/86/191ab; D/A1/199/104.

⁶⁷ Jackson, 'Berkshire Woollen Industry', 51-4, 89-90, 129-30.

⁶⁸ Amyce's Survey.

⁶⁹ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/16 /355; D/A1/127/137ab.

⁷⁰ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/71/207b; D/A1/79/133.

The number of clothiers operating in Abingdon in the 16th century was extremely small compared with Reading and Newbury. Whereas the expansion of cloth manufacture in Reading and Newbury was both facilitated by, and encouraged, the emergence of industrial capitalists, in Abingdon the industry remained largely in the hands of mercantile capitalists and stagnated. Two clothiers are known to have operated in Abingdon in the 16th century, Thomas Braybrooke (will dated 1541) and John Bower (burial recorded 1587).⁷¹ The provisions made in Braybrooke's will suggest that he may have invested in land and retired from clothmaking well before his death, perhaps in response to the economic difficulties of the 1520s. A further clothier, John Batt, was buried in the town in 1587, but may have been a visitor from Gloucester.⁷² Another clothier, Stephen Scottesford, died in comparative poverty at the turn of the century. An inventory valuation of £20 is recorded on the application to administer his estate in 1604.⁷³ The complete absence of inventories for the town's clothiers inevitably restricts not only the information available about the structure and organisation of clothmaking in Abingdon in the 16th century, but also about the range and quality of cloths produced there. The medieval aulnage records indicate that Abingdon had been a producer of ordinary quality grey broadcloth, possibly purchased to provide clothes for servants and almspeople.⁷⁴ Cloth purchases made by Osney Abbey in 1521 suggest that Abingdon was producing a similar product in the 16th century.⁷⁵ The activities of the town's woolmen are similarly poorly served by the surviving probate evidence. No inventory has survived for John Audlett, one of the town's leading woolmen and steward of the abbey from 1509. A court case reveals that his wife Katherine continued to deal in wool after his death, selling wool to a Wiltshire clothier, Thomas Long of Trowbridge.⁷⁶ Another case provides an insight into the trading practices of Gilbert Freeman, an Abingdon wool dealer and yarn manufacturer, who purchased the entire clip of a Berkshire wool producer in 1540.⁷⁷

The surviving inventories of the town's woollen drapers – which fortuitously include those of some of the wealthier town drapers because probate documents were filed in both the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and the Archdeaconry Court of Berkshire – happily paint a more detailed and interesting picture and provide some insights into their domination of the clothing trade. It seems likely that in the 16th century, as probably in the 15th century, some Abingdon drapers operated the *kaufsystem*, restricting their involvement in the cloth trade to the purchase of cloth from independent weavers, while others developed a *verlagsystem* and purchased, sorted, dyed and distributed wool for carding and spinning and yarn for weaving, both in the town and amongst the villages of North Berkshire. Some cloth was fulled and finished in the town before marketing.⁷⁸

By the middle of the 16th century, however, the focus of Abingdon's drapery trade appears to have changed, and instead of commissioning and marketing locally produced cloth, at least some of the town's drapers were developing a substantial inland trade in cloth

⁷¹ PRO, PROB 11/29 (P.C.C. 1 Spert); St. Helen's parish reg.

⁷² St. Helen's parish reg.

⁷³ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/13/332.

⁷⁴ A.E. Preston, *Fairs and Markets* (1922), 25.

⁷⁵ H.E. Salter, *Cartulary of Osney Abbey* (O.H.S. 1936), vi, 285.

⁷⁶ BRO, A.E. Preston, Notes on Abingdon, D/EP 7/94.

⁷⁷ P.J. Bowden, *The Wool Trade in Tudor and Stuart England* (1962), 62, 89.

⁷⁸ It seems likely that a range of organisational structures co-existed. For example some of the more prosperous clothiers and weavers from East Hendred and Wantage may have sold their cloths direct to merchant adventurers, such as Thomas Kitson, recorded as purchasing cloth from Faringdon, or through local fairs e.g. Cuckhamsley Hill Fair at East Hendred: A.L. Humphreys, *East Hendred, A Berkshire Parish* (1923), 309.

from the nation's major clothing regions. Abingdon was well placed geographically to do this. The town's central position, close to the borders of the clothing counties of Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, and with easy access to the manufactures of the Kennet Valley and Hampshire, must have been a considerable advantage. The town's location on both major cross country and north-south carrier routes was also highly advantageous. Very little is known of the scale and workings of the inland trade in woollen cloth, but despite the much criticised predilection of the wealthy for imported luxury fabrics and the equally publicised fall in the purchasing power of wages, it seems likely that demand was large and growing, not least in prosperous north Berkshire and south Oxfordshire.⁷⁹ Thirsk's work has pointed to the rising demand for consumer goods in the 16th century, and it does not seem unreasonable to suggest a parallel increase in the demand for cloth.⁸⁰ Not only was the population growing, but the household and clothing needs of the more prosperous were also expanding and homespun and second-hand clothing, bedding and other items, may have become less acceptable further down the social scale.

The earliest Abingdon draper's inventory, that of John Bostock taken in 1550, lists shop goods to the value of £100 4s. 4d. including two piles of broadcloth valued at £13, one pile of broadcloth at £14, one pile of Western Red at £10, one pile of narrow cloth at £7, one pile of white kersies at £12 and one pile of fine Western kersies at £8. His gross inventory valuation was £242 10s. 4d. Lionel Welford's inventory, taken in 1596, demonstrates the continuing involvement of some drapers in clothmaking. His wool loft contained 5 tod of wool and 30 lb. of yarn valued at £6.10s. 0d., together with weighing and carding equipment. His trade was diversified since he not only stocked broadcloths, broad penistones, bayes, friezes, cottons and kersies but also mercery wares to the value of £40. His shop book indicates that he had extended credit of £70 to customers. His gross inventory valuation was £357 5s. 6d. His substantial house included a separate 'prentice chamber. He left numerous bequests, including 40s. to the poor of Abingdon.⁸¹ William Younge, who died in 1612, stocked kersies, bayes, penistones, cottons, friezes, fustians and sackcloth to the value of £136 10s. 0d. and had a gross inventory valuation of £207 7s. 11d.⁸² John Paine's inventory, taken in 1631, provides evidence of the exceptional profits made by a small number of drapers. His gross inventory valuation of £2,206 13s. 8d. included a substantial quantity of cloth, described as broadcloths valued at £186 15s. 2d., Hampshire kersies at £149 2s. 0d., Devonshire and other kersies, penistones, bayes, friezes, cottons and ruggs at £179 3s. 10d., and stuffs and fustians at £148 16s. 3d. He allowed credit to the value of almost £1,000 upon his shop books. He owned arable land in Northmoor valued at £220 and his large house was luxuriously furnished.⁸³ The sophisticated consumerism of Abingdon shoppers can perhaps be demonstrated by mention of the inventory of the mercer, William Luckins, taken in 1585. He stocked a wide range of non-woollen fabrics, including taffeta, mockado and also tinsel, silk fringes, lace, thread, buttons and other items, manufactured both in England and abroad.⁸⁴

Despite the impressive fortune accumulated by John Paine, some drapers appear to have struggled in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Ralph Townsend, for example, who died in 1579, attracted an inventory valuation of only £57 16s. 4d. and Edward Staunton in 1633

⁷⁹ Further research into debts is required to pursue this point further.

⁸⁰ Thirsk, *Economic Policy*, 8.

⁸¹ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/133/190ab.

⁸² BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/142/60ab.

⁸³ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/106/20.

⁸⁴ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/92/60a. 'The whole some' of William Luckin's inventory was £224 15s. 8d.

commanded a mere £14 18s. 3d.⁸⁵ It seems likely that the trading opportunities available to Abingdon's drapers and mercers, although highly profitable *per se*, were more limited than expected and insufficient to generate adequate profits for a large group of drapers. The development of London as a social centre for the nobility and gentry resulted in the growth of the capital's retail trade at the expense of local suppliers from the late 16th century onwards.⁸⁶ Evidence from Worcester suggests that competition for custom also increased at the bottom end of the social scale during the second half of the 16th century. The rise of the village tailor drew rural trade away from the urban draper because many tailors supplied their own cloth.⁸⁷ As in earlier centuries, Abingdon's drapers were also constrained to compete with visiting drapers plying their wares from stalls at the town's markets and fairs.⁸⁸ Ultimately, many of Abingdon's drapers diverted their capital into more lucrative commercial investments. Some invested in landed estates but others moved into malting. A corporation minute of 1585 lists the town's leading maltsters. These included the names of prominent woollen drapers such as William Braunche and Lionel Bostock.⁸⁹ The trade expanded rapidly so that by 1599, the corporation was bemoaning the ruin and decay of the streets and lanes of the town due to 'the great trade of maulting'.⁹⁰

To return to Leland's observation, what tentative conclusions can be drawn about the nature and extent of Abingdon's clothmaking in the 16th century? The evidence to date suggests that Abingdon's specialisation in cloth manufacture was never more than modest and that even at the height of investment mania in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the town's mercantile and industrial capitalists resisted, or were constrained from pursuing, opportunities to expand production in the town on a large scale. Although wool was spun and carded and cloth was woven in the town from the 13th century through to the 17th century, the marketing of wool and cloth were far more important activities. Unlike Reading and Newbury, Abingdon does not appear to have developed significant expertise in cloth finishing during the medieval period and was thus perhaps prevented from emulating its neighbours' success in producing high quality dyed and dressed kersies and broadcloths for the export market at the peak periods of demand in the early and late 16th century. The pattern of economic development in Abingdon appears to have been significantly different from the patterns found in Reading and Newbury, where expansion and increased prosperity followed increased levels of both entrepreneurial investment and involvement.⁹¹ The prevalence of mercantile rather than industrial capitalists in Abingdon, not only in the medieval period but throughout the 16th century, may have created a situation where investment shifted more readily from one trade to another in pursuit of profit. From the 14th to the 15th centuries, investment in Abingdon moved increasingly from the export trade in wool to domestic wool sales and more particularly to the cloth trade. As cloth production declined in Abingdon and its rural hinterland, some of the town's drapers and mercers took advantage of the growing consumer boom to expand their trade in drapery

⁸⁵ BRO, MS Wills Berks. D/A1/10/184; D/A1/214/10.

⁸⁶ A.D. Dyer, *The City of Worcester in the Sixteenth Century* (1973), 88.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 89-90.

⁸⁸ Drapers were clearly perceived to be more prosperous (or at least their wares potentially more profitable) than their fellow tradesmen, since a council minute of 1559 laid down that linen and woollen drapers should be charged 4d. for stalls at markets and fairs, which was twice that to be charged for leather and metal trades: N. Hammond, *The Book of Abingdon* (1979), 53-4.

⁸⁹ Challoner, 128.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 129.

⁹¹ Jackson, 'Berkshire Woollen Industry', 67-8.

and mercery products, but unable to withstand the magnetism of the London market, many moved quickly on to grain dealing and malt production. Throughout the century, the town authorities were inclined to regard cloth production as a means of providing employment and relief for the poor. The slight expansion of cloth production and cloth finishing in the town in the early 17th century may reflect the improved fortunes of the cloth trade but is more likely to represent a response to the expanding population of the town and its rural hinterland.

Abingdon Abbey undoubtedly exercised a significant influence upon the economic development of Abingdon until its dissolution in 1538. Conflict between ecclesiastical authorities and urban interests in towns and cities in the medieval period frequently hinged upon the control of trade and industry, and appears to reflect not only competition for financial gain but also a divergence between the backward-looking economic and social conservatism of ecclesiastical landowners and the forward-looking commercial and industrial opportunism of potential entrepreneurs. The notorious and violent riots of 1327, when the townsmen of Abingdon unsuccessfully objected to the abbey's monopoly of market profits and demanded self-government, and the continuing clashes between town and abbey in the 14th century, may have encouraged successive abbots to resist pressure for industrial expansion.⁹² An abundance of apprentices and journeymen was not considered conducive to good order. It was in any case in the abbey's economic interests to promote the expansion of trade rather than manufacture. A direct parallel can be drawn with Newbury and Reading. The rapid expansion and prosperity of Newbury's cloth industry in the late medieval period demonstrates the economic opportunities realisable in a town with comparable locational advantages but without close ecclesiastical control.⁹³ Reading's industrial expansion was more modest in the 15th and early 16th centuries, but the town enjoyed a second and more profitable expansion of cloth manufacture in the second half of the 16th century after the town's drapers, mercers and clothiers had secured their long-sought freedom from abbatial control.⁹⁴ In Abingdon, there does not appear to have been a comparable drive to expand cloth manufacture. Tucker's ability to distribute outwork for his Burford-based clothing business in Abingdon in the 1530s suggests that the abbey was not averse to entrepreneurial activities that provided employment to the poor, and indeed, by this date, the abbey's grip on the town may have been weakening. Most noticeably, unlike Reading, the town's drapers did not seize the opportunity afforded by the dissolution of the abbey and the achievement of borough status to expand cloth production. Abingdon's economic recovery in the late 16th century was based on malt rather than cloth.

The relative lack of enthusiasm for promoting clothmaking in Abingdon throughout the 16th century almost certainly reflects a realistic assessment of the economic opportunities available to the town. As a market town, the direction and success of Abingdon's economy were to a considerable degree dependent upon economic choices made within its rural hinterland. The great expansion of rural cloth production in northern Berkshire in the late 14th century had been the direct consequence of acute labour shortages and falling agricultural prices in the aftermath of a severe demographic crisis. The difficulties of the wool export trade and decline of continental manufacture had also encouraged wool producing areas to convert their wool to cloth during this period. Once population growth resumed and agricultural prices rose in the 15th century, the balance of economic advantage

⁹² G. Lambrick, 'Abingdon and the Riots of 1327', *Oxoniensia*, xxxix (1964), 129-41.

⁹³ Jackson, 'Berkshire Woollen Industry', 71-6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 76-7, 154-5.

in northern Berkshire shifted to favour commercial arable farming.⁹⁵ The rapid expansion of London from the late 14th century onwards was clearly critical. An early pattern of rural de-industrialisation is discernible in counties close to London as they were drawn into the capital's food supply chain.⁹⁶ Without the strong manufacturing base found in Newbury and Reading, and particularly the cloth finishing expertise that enabled the towns to develop the specialised production of dyed and dressed kersies and broadcloths for export, Abingdon had little choice but to follow the lead of its rural hinterland. The town may also have struggled to compete with the vigorous expansion of clothmaking in Newbury and London's growing domination of the cloth export trade.⁹⁷ Clothmaking had declined or was declining in many urban centres by 1500 due to the greater organizational freedom and lower wage costs available in rural cloth producing areas. Newbury and Reading survived as major clothing centres for a further century because they produced high quality products that benefited from close regulation and absorbed the higher costs of urban manufacture, but ultimately they too were priced out of the market. The decline of Abingdon's cloth industry was not inevitable, as Witney's success in developing a specialist blanket manufactory demonstrates, but much depended on entrepreneurial will and the range of economic opportunities available.⁹⁸

To some degree, the question of whether Abingdon had a significant clothing function during the early 16th century is merely one of perspective. Most occupations in the pre-industrial period were extremely labour intensive and productivity was low by modern standards. As a result, a large proportion of any town's population was employed in the essential urban functions of feeding, clothing and housing its inhabitants, and a textile specialisation of 25-30% would therefore have been regarded as substantial by contemporaries.⁹⁹ In a borderline provincial town such as Abingdon, with a prestigious abbey in its midst, a thriving rural hinterland to service, and positioned on major road and river routes, its working population was spread between a wide variety of occupations.¹⁰⁰ The scope for a manufacturing specialisation in the early 16th century was therefore modest and limited further by the town's thriving leather industry. Leland clearly could and did note differences in the degree of industrial specialisation found in the towns and cities on his itinerary. Visiting Reading, he commented that 'these waters be very commodius for diers, well occupied there; for the towne chiefly stonndith by clothyng'.¹⁰¹ Worcester, a major producer of traditional white broadcloths, attracted higher praise. Leland noted that the town's wealth 'standeth most by draping, and no town of England, at this present time,

⁹⁵ The 15th century was characterised by fluctuations and contradictory tendencies in arable cultivation and pastoral farming: M. Yates, 'Change and Continuities in Rural Societies from the Later Middle Ages to the 16th century: the Contribution of West Berkshire', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* lii (1999), 617. Cereal production was more labour intensive than pastoral farming and thus offered fewer low opportunity costs for the development of rural industry.

⁹⁶ Hoskins, *Plunder*, 157; Fisher, 'Development of London Food Market', 51; J.A. Galloway, 'One Market or Many? London and the Grain Trade of England', in J.A. Galloway (ed.), *Trade, Urban Hinterlands and Market Integration c.1300-1600* (2000), 28-9.

⁹⁷ A number of Abingdonians moved to London during the early 16th century to join City companies including Thomas Branche (draper) and John Royse (mercier).

⁹⁸ Plummer and Earley, *Blanketmakers*, 1-11.

⁹⁹ Goose, 'Provincial Towns', 229.

¹⁰⁰ Some 20 occupations might be found in a small town, 40-100 in larger towns. Analysis based on probate sources only reveals over 40 occupations in Abingdon 1500-99, and over 60 occupations 1600-49. Analysis based on St. Helen's parish registers 1538-96 reveals over 50 occupations 1538-96.

¹⁰¹ Toulmin Smith, *Leland*, i, 111.

maketh so many cloths yearly as this town doth'.¹⁰² It is interesting that as late as 1599, Thomas Patye of Reading described Wallingford as one of Berkshire's 'clothing towns'.¹⁰³ That town had long been in decline and there are no indications that its cloth manufacture was either extensive or notable in the 16th century. Significantly, Leland does not even mention clothmaking in his brief description of Wallingford.¹⁰⁴ When Leland visited Abingdon in the late 1530s or early 1540s, the town's architectural heritage bore witness to past commercial prosperity, its wool and cloth trade were clearly still impressive, and its cloth manufactory was more than sufficient to meet local needs and provide some employment to the poor. With the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent that clothmaking was already declining in Abingdon and its hinterland. In the aftermath of the mid-century slump in cloth exports, and faced with London's growing domination of the inland trade in cloth, many of Abingdon's urban elite found that property and the London beer trade offered safer – and perhaps no less spectacular – profits than the cloth trade.

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¹⁰² Ibid. ii, 91.

¹⁰³ PRO, Exchequer Depositions, E 134/41 Eliz/East.1.

¹⁰⁴ Toulmin Smith, *Leland*, i, 118-19.