

Monastic Town Planning at Abingdon

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SUMMARY

Study of Abingdon's layout suggests two episodes of medieval town planning, which occurred in a settlement of much older origins. Abingdon abbey claimed lordship of the town throughout the Middle Ages and must have been the agent of these developments, probably in the twelfth century. The town can therefore be seen as one of a number of English towns in which a Benedictine monastic house promoted urban development in the settlement outside its gate.

In their 1975 study of Abingdon, Munby et al. refer to 'the lack of well-defined medieval planned elements' in the topography of the town.¹ Slater notes, however, that 'the Benedictines were the most urban of the monastic orders' and points to a number of cases in which towns adjacent to Benedictine abbeys have 'distinctively planned townscapes which show that they had been deliberately promoted by the monastic community as a means of increasing their revenue'.² Abingdon abbey was one of the richest Benedictine houses in the country,³ and the settlement of Abingdon formed part of the abbey's estates from an early period. The question therefore arises: can any evidence for medieval town planning be detected at Abingdon? This paper addresses this question. In doing so, it builds on Lambrick's recognition, as long ago as 1968, that the present Market Place outside the abbey gate was a later addition to a more ancient plan which had St Helen's church as its original focus.⁴

The approach taken in this paper is essentially an 'urban morphological' one. It proceeds from the premise that once urban streets and major property boundaries have been established, they tend to be strongly resistant to change and to persist in the townscape for long periods. Thus, mapping which is much later in date (such as that undertaken by the Ordnance Survey in the late nineteenth century) will often reflect street patterns and property boundaries established in the Middle Ages.⁵ It should be emphasised, however, that it has not been possible to undertake a full analysis of Abingdon's plan for this paper. It is hoped that the conclusions offered here may prompt further work on the topography of the town. A metrological analysis of plots to establish whether the original tenements were laid out to a standard frontage or area, using the method described by Slater, would be especially worthwhile.⁶ Rodwell has previously suggested that there is a significant number of plots in Abingdon with a width of 6 m (20 ft).⁷

¹ J. Munby, K. Rodwell, and H. Turner, 'Abingdon', in K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: A Survey of the New County* (Oxford, 1975), p. 33.

² T.R. Slater, 'Benedictine Town Planning in Medieval England: Evidence from St Albans', in T.R. Slater and G. Rosser (eds.), *The Church in the Medieval Town* (Aldershot, 1998), p. 156.

³ D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1948–59), vol. 3, pp. 473–4.

⁴ M. Biddle, H.T. [Gabrielle] Lambrick, and J.N.L. Myres, 'The Early History of Abingdon, Berkshire and its Abbey', *MedArch*, 12 (1968), pp. 28–9.

⁵ e.g. M.R.G. Conzen, *Alnwick, Northumberland: a Study in Town Plan Analysis*, Institute of British Geographers Publication, 27 (London, 1960); J.W.R. Whitehand (ed.), *The Urban Landscape: Historical Development and Management*, Institute of British Geographers Special Publication, 13 (London, 1981); T.R. Slater, 'Understanding the Landscape of Towns', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Landscape: the Richest Historical Record*, Society for Landscape Studies, Supplementary Series, 1 (Amesbury, 2000), pp. 97–108.

⁶ T.R. Slater, 'The Analysis of Burgages in Medieval Towns', *Area*, 13 (1981), pp. 211–16.

⁷ K. Rodwell, 'Introduction', in Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire*, p. 19.



Fig. 1. Abingdon, showing: A – line of the Iron-Age *oppidum* defences; B – site of abbey church; C – Market Place; D – St Helen's church. OS 1:2,500 map, Berks. X.6 (1899 edn). Copyright and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group (all rights reserved). Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.

THE SETTLEMENT AT ABINGDON

Abingdon was already an ancient place at the time of the foundation (or, possibly, re-foundation) of Abingdon abbey in the 950s.⁸ The town lies at the confluence of the rivers Ock and Thames, at a crossing point of the Thames. There was a large Iron-Age settlement underneath the present town centre. In the late Iron Age, this settlement was enclosed with a series of defensive banks and ditches to create a so-called ‘defended *oppidum*’ (Fig. 1).⁹ At least part of this defensive circuit still survived in the medieval period.¹⁰ The Iron-Age *oppidum* was succeeded by a significant Roman settlement, probably a local market centre.¹¹ The Abingdon area subsequently saw pagan Saxon settlement, and sunken-featured buildings of this date have been found in the town centre.¹² The foundation traditions of the abbey held that there was already a settlement at Abingdon when the abbey was founded there in (according to monastic tradition) the late seventh century. St Helen’s church may have originated in the Saxon period as an early minster.¹³ Abingdon had already acquired some urban attributes by the eleventh century: Domesday Book records ‘ten traders dwelling in front of the church gate’.¹⁴

Thus, any medieval town planning undertaken at Abingdon would have happened in the context of an existing settlement; it was not a matter of laying out a new town on a green-field site (as happened in some other places, such as (New) Thame in probably the early thirteenth century).¹⁵ As noted above, it may be that St Helen’s church provided an earlier focal point in the topography of the town, before the market place was established at the gates of the abbey.¹⁶

Any significant medieval planning in the town can only have been instigated by the abbey. The abbots seem to have retained a firm grip on the administration of the town in the face of some inhabitants’ desire for self-regulation. In a lawsuit in 1363, the abbot claimed to have been the lord of Abingdon from ‘time immemorial’, and the monastery maintained its control until the dissolution.¹⁷

THE PERIMETER OF THE MONASTIC PRECINCT

The clearest evidence for large-scale town planning is to be found around the western and northern perimeter of the abbey precinct (Fig. 2). To the north of the abbey gateway lies Stert Street, so called from the River Stert which flows (now in a culvert) down the east side of the street. It is possible that this part of the course of the Stert is an artificial channel,¹⁸ although this is unproven. In any event, early maps show a long, straight boundary running north from St Nicholas’s church

⁸ S. Kelly, *Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, 2 vols., Anglo-Saxon Charters, 7–8 (Oxford, 2000–1), vol. 1, pp. xxxv–vi.

⁹ T. Allen, ‘Abingdon Vineyard Redevelopment’, *SMidlA*, 20 (1990), pp. 73–8; T. Allen, ‘An ‘Oppidum’ at Abingdon, Oxfordshire’, *SMidlA*, 21 (1991), pp. 97–9; T. Allen, ‘Abingdon: West Central Redevelopment Area’, *SMidlA*, 27 (1997), pp. 47–54.

¹⁰ T. Allen, ‘Abingdon: West Central Redevelopment Area’, *SMidlA*, 27 (1997), p. 53; K. Brady, A. Smith, and G. Laws, ‘Excavations at Abingdon West Central Redevelopment: Iron Age, Roman, Medieval, and Post-Medieval Activity in Abingdon’, *Oxoniensia*, 72 (2007), p. 115.

¹¹ M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 2000), pp. 41, 71–2.

¹² Allen, ‘Abingdon Vineyard Redevelopment’, pp. 74–5.

¹³ Biddle, Lambrick, and Myres, ‘Early History of Abingdon’, p. 26; J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 1998), pp. 64–5.

¹⁴ P. Morgan (ed.), *Domesday Book. 5 – Berkshire* (Chichester 1979), 7.6.

¹⁵ For Thame see J. Bond, ‘The Oxford Region in the Middle Ages’ in G. Briggs, J. Cook, and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 137–8.

¹⁶ Biddle, Lambrick, and Myres, ‘Early History of Abingdon’, p. 29.

¹⁷ G. Lambrick and C.F. Slade (eds.), *Two Cartularies of Abingdon Abbey*, 2 vols., OHS, ns, 32–3 (Oxford, 1990–2), vol. 2, pp. xxix, xl.

¹⁸ Allen, ‘Abingdon Vineyard Redevelopment’, p. 76.

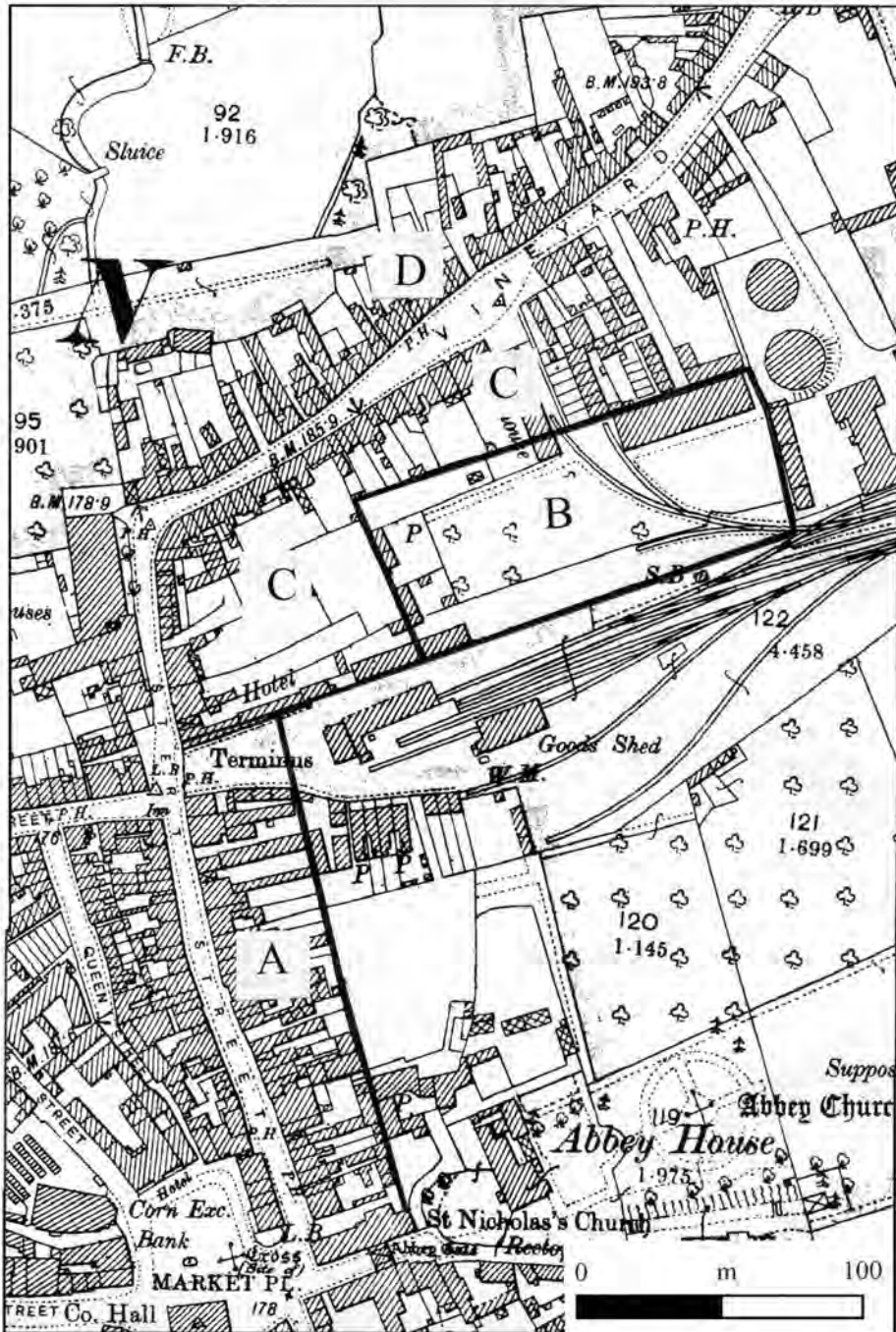


Fig. 2. The north and west sides of the abbey precinct, showing: A – strip of properties between the north-south precinct wall and the river Stert (now culverted beneath the east side of Stert Street); B – the vine-growing area; C – plots between the vine-growing area and Stert Street (to the west) and the Vineyard (to the north); D – possible ‘cigar-shaped’ market place. OS 1:2,500 map, Berks. X.6 (1899 edn). Copyright and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group (all rights reserved). Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.

(which stands at the abbey gateway), set some distance back from Stert Street and the line of the River Stert. This boundary is very clearly that of the monastic precinct.

On the strip of land left between the River Stert and the precinct boundary is a series of long, generally thin properties, varying in length between about 31 and 39 m. These were referred to in the Middle Ages as being 'under the wall of the monks' garden'.¹⁹ Surviving monastic account books record that eleven properties in this strip were providing an income to the abbey in the late fourteenth century.²⁰ Roger Amyce's 1554 survey of Abingdon records that almost every property on the east side of Stert Street had belonged to the abbey at the dissolution.²¹ The close association of this strip of properties with the abbey is underlined by the fact that it was included in the parish of St Nicholas when that parish was formally defined in 1372. People who had close connections with the abbey (such as servants) were allocated to the newly defined parish; in geographical terms, it included places where these people lived or worked.²²

Thus, it looks as if the abbey carefully established the line of the precinct boundary so as to leave a strip of land between it and Stert Street, with the line of the River Stert forming the west boundary of this strip. The strip was then divided up into properties which were rented out. A broadly comparable situation may have existed along the precinct boundary behind the east side of Bridge Street, to the south of the abbey gateway; again, every property here belonged to the abbey at the dissolution, although the line of the precinct boundary there is not so clear.²³ It is also possible that the present line of Stert Street itself may have been established as part of this episode of planning, perhaps connected with the suggested realignment of the main road out of Abingdon towards Oxford (now called the Vineyard).²⁴

The northern end of the Stert Street strip of properties is defined by part of a long, straight boundary which formerly ran eastwards from Stert Street for almost 300 m. To the north of this boundary lies the area known as 'the Vineyard'. The name is first recorded in c.1184–5, when reference was made to 'Wynerde Berton'. This was a tithing which took its name from the abbey's nearby home farm of 'le berton' (Barton), and which lay on the south side of the road now known as the Vineyard. A separate tithing, known as Wynerde Sunningwell (although with no clear connection to the nearby village of Sunningwell) lay on the north side of the road.²⁵ The abbey is known to have cultivated vines until the early fifteenth century.²⁶

It is possible, from topographical indications (supplemented by archaeological evidence), to suggest the location and extent of the medieval vine-growing area itself. The large-scale Christ's Hospital map of 1844 shows a large rectangular plot of about two acres (0.8 hectares) to the south of the Vineyard, with access from the Vineyard via a street or lane now known as New Lane.²⁷ This plot is also visible on the OS 1:2500 map of 1899 (Fig. 2), although there had been some subdivision by then.

It seems likely that this plot represents the medieval vine-growing area. The southern boundary of the plot is formed by part of the long boundary described above; this boundary, and the eastern

¹⁹ A.E. Preston, *The Church and Parish of St Nicholas, Abingdon, and Other Papers* (London, 1929), p. 35.

²⁰ R.E.G. Kirk (ed.), *Accounts of the Obedientiars of Abingdon Abbey*, Camden Society, ns, 51 (London, 1892), pp. 51–2.

²¹ Roger Amyce's *Survey of Abingdon* (1554). Copies are in The National Archives (TNA: PRO, LR2/189), Abingdon Town Council archive (C 6) and Christ's Hospital archive, Abingdon. I am indebted to Janey Cumber for information from this survey.

²² Preston, *St Nicholas*, pp. 32–4.

²³ Amyce, *Survey of Abingdon*.

²⁴ James Bond, personal communication 2010, suggests that the Oxford Road may originally have continued on a fairly direct alignment into East St Helen Street, and that this alignment may have been disrupted at an early date (perhaps in the tenth century) by the original creation of the abbey precinct.

²⁵ Preston, *St Nicholas*, pp. 37–8; A.C. Baker, *Historic Streets of Abingdon* (Abingdon, 1957), p. 26.

²⁶ J. Townsend, *A History of Abingdon* (London, 1910), p. 39.

²⁷ This map is held in the archives of Christ's Hospital in Abingdon. A traced and coloured copy is held by Oxfordshire County Museums Service at Abingdon Museum.

boundary of the supposed vine-growing area, form part of the parish boundary of St Nicholas. The implication is that the vine-growing area lay outside the boundary of the monastic precinct.²⁸ As the parish of St Nicholas was defined in 1372 to formalise existing arrangements, it seems likely that the boundaries of the parish were following existing features.

On its western and northern sides, between the vine-growing area and the street (the northern part of Stert Street and the street called the Vineyard, respectively), was a series of plots of varying size and shape. It seems likely that these, too, were laid out by the abbey, as part of the overall planning of the area. It is also conceivable that the planning of this area – establishing the vine-growing area and plots surrounding it – involved realigning the main road from Oxford as it enters Abingdon. As the present Oxford Road approaches the Vineyard from the north-east, it changes direction very slightly towards the north, and then runs to a sharp corner with Stert Street; the road does not seem to be following the most direct route towards the town centre (Fig. 1). It may be that the alignment was more direct at one time, but was moved somewhat to the north to clear the south-facing slope for the vine-growing area. This would also have created space for properties fronting a main road on the north and west sides of the vine-growing area.

Archaeological evidence, from excavations in the Vineyard area between 1989 and 1996, has added something to the picture. On the north side of the supposed vine-growing area, a zone of pits dating from the later twelfth century to the sixteenth or seventeenth century extended back about 25 m from the street frontage. This zone seems to have been bounded to the south by a shallow east-west ditch, the line of which was followed by a post-medieval wall. To the south of this line, medieval features were few and there were extensive garden soils. The excavator interpreted this as being part of the abbey vineyard.²⁹ The east-west ditch and later wall may correlate with the northern boundary of the vine-growing area shown on the historic maps, although this is not clear from the small-scale published location plan of the excavation. On the west side of the vine-growing area, thirteenth-century building remains and pits have been identified. At some time (imprecisely dated, but certainly post-Roman), part of the area close to the junction of Stert Street and the Vineyard had been cultivated, before being covered by a thick dumped layer in the twelfth or thirteenth century.³⁰

One final and rather speculative observation may be made on the Vineyard (that is, the street of that name rather than the vine-growing area itself). The street widens out to give a somewhat 'cigar-shaped' form (Fig. 2). It is conceivable that it was laid out in this way so as to form some kind of secondary or subsidiary market area along this main road. Thomas states that a horse fair was held in the Vineyard until 1914, but no source for this statement is given.³¹ Livestock markets were sometimes established on the edges of towns in the medieval period.³²

In summary, it seems that there was town planning on the western and northern sides of the monastic precinct on a fairly ambitious scale. This involved defining the western side of the precinct in a way which allowed a strip of properties to be developed adjacent to the precinct boundary along Stert Street, defining the vine-growing area, and probably establishing properties between the newly-defined vine-growing area and the street. The plan may also have involved a realignment of the main road out of the town and the creation of a new channel for the River Stert. As to the date of these developments, the vineyard is first referred to in the mid 1180s and the archaeological evidence points to occupation (and to a division between a cultivated area and tenements on the street front) from the later twelfth century onwards. The question of date is discussed further below.

²⁸ Preston, *St Nicholas*, p. 37.

²⁹ T. Allen, 'Abingdon Vineyard Area 6', *SMidLA*, 26 (1996), pp. 51–5.

³⁰ Allen, 'Abingdon: Vineyard Development', *SMidLA*, 19 (1989), p. 45.

³¹ M.J. Thomas, *Abingdon in Camera – Portrait of a Country Town 1850–1950* (Abingdon, 1979), Photo 91.

³² C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages. The People of Britain 850–1520* (London, 2002), p. 197.

THE MARKET PLACE OR 'BURY'

The present Market Place, at the gate of the abbey, is a focal point in the town plan of Abingdon (Fig. 1). It is likely to have been so since at least the eleventh century, given the Domesday record of traders living 'in front of the church gate'.³³ This location is generally equated with the present-day Market Place, onto which the abbey gateway still opens. Aston and Bond suggest that the Market Place may have been established in the later tenth or early eleventh century.³⁴ It is worth observing that placing the Domesday merchants here does involve assuming that the abbey precinct was the same size in 1086, and the main entrance to the abbey in the same place, as it was in the later Middle Ages. In what follows it will be assumed that the earliest market area *was* close to the present-day abbey gateway, and that the modern Market Place represents an early feature in the town's topography.

The market rights at Abingdon were of great importance to the abbey. There were disputes over these rights in the reigns of Henry I and Henry II; in the former case, the abbey paid 300 marks for confirmation of the rights, showing how valuable they were.³⁵ Abingdon's rights to a full market were eventually confirmed in 1163.³⁶ Subsequently, there was continuing litigation between the abbey and townspeople over market stalls.³⁷ Lambrick refers to the 'monastic stranglehold on all the trading profits in the town', including the rents and fines received for stalls and booths which the abbot claimed as lord of Abingdon.³⁸ It is clear that the market place at Abingdon was an important focus of monastic proprietorial and commercial interest in the medieval period.

An alternative name for the market place in Abingdon was 'the Bury'. This name was formerly applied to an area more extensive than that of the present-day Market Place: 'the Bury' seems to have included the High Street as well, and to have extended down both East and West St Helen Streets as far as their junctions with Lombard Street.³⁹ It is therefore interesting that the topography of the High Street–Lombard Street area shows evidence of what looks like careful planning. Lombard Street runs between West and East St Helen Streets, to the south of High Street and roughly parallel to it. Lombard Street went under various names in the medieval period, recorded from the early thirteenth century onwards.⁴⁰

The street frontage on the south side of Lombard Street is remarkably straight, and the plots which run back from the frontage are fairly regular. On the north side of Lombard Street is a block (or 'island') of plots, bounded by West St Helen Street, High Street, and East St Helen Street on its west, north, and east sides respectively. The frontage of this block onto the south side of High Street is also fairly straight, and this part of the High Street is noticeably wider than the part which lies west of the junction with West St Helen Street. It looks as if the 'island' frontage may have been deliberately set back; this part of the High Street is one of the widest streets in the town centre. The plots in this block (and especially those fronting the High Street) are generally quite regular. An exception to this is the eastern part of the block, where the plots are more irregular in shape and pattern (Fig. 3).

It is possible that Lombard Street originated as a back lane, serving the rear of properties on the south side of the High Street. The very straight south side of Lombard Street and the fact that regular plots run back from it, along with a certain amount of documentary and other evidence, however, suggests that there may be more to the origins of Lombard Street than this.

³³ Morgan, *Domesday Book*, 7.6.

³⁴ M. Aston and J. Bond, *The Landscape of Towns* (London, 1976), p. 76

³⁵ J. Hudson, *Historia Ecclesie Abendonensis. The History of the Church of Abingdon*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2002–7), vol. 2, p. lxxxix.

³⁶ *Ibid.* pp. lxxxix–ix.

³⁷ Lambrick and Slade, *Two Cartularies*, vol. 2, p. xxxix.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

³⁹ Baker, *Historic Streets of Abingdon*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 11.

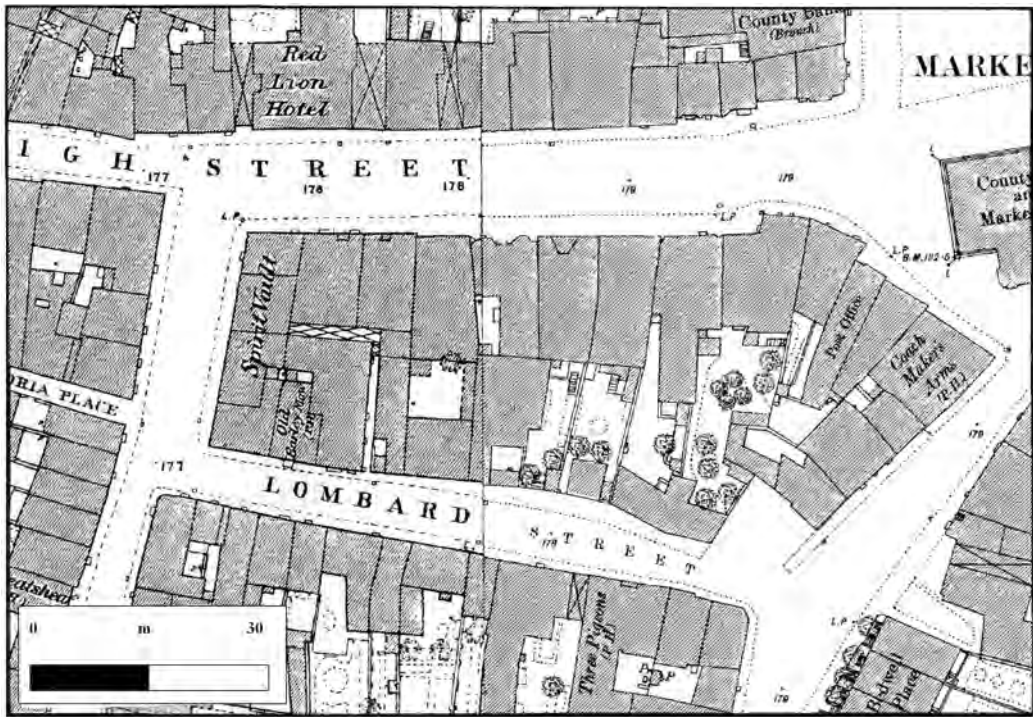


Fig. 3. The Lombard Street/High Street area, showing the straight south side of Lombard Street (with plots running back from it) and the High Street 'island' block of regular plots (with eastward extension of more irregular plots). The High Street in front of this block is very wide. OS 1:500 map, Berks. X.6, 13, and 14 (1877 edn). Copyright and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group (all rights reserved). Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.

(The suggestion that the north-south boundaries of properties between High Street and Lombard Street continue across to the south side of Lombard Street, and that Lombard Street may have been cut through the existing properties,⁴¹ is not, in the opinion of the present writer, borne out by a detailed examination of the evidence.) The interpretation advanced here is that the south side of Lombard Street and the 'island' block of properties between Lombard Street and the High Street represent the result of an episode of town planning, carried out in order to increase the size of the market place and to increase the length of commercial frontages available there. The regularity of the plots in much of the High Street 'island', the unusual width of the High Street here and the straightness of the south side of Lombard Street all point to systematic planning. This may have involved formalising and developing an existing open space (see below), in order to extend the existing market area in front of the abbey gateway (the present Market Place).

This could have taken place in a single episode or in more than one stage. The straight south frontage of Lombard Street and the High Street 'island' block could have been established at the same time, with the south side of Lombard Street providing an additional commercial frontage (perhaps secondary to the main High Street frontage) within a general market area. Alternatively, the south side of Lombard Street could originally have been established as the south side of a much larger open market area, with most of the High Street 'island' block representing a subsequent episode of planned development within it. Whenever the 'island' was originally established, it

⁴¹ J. Steane, '(2a) Abingdon, 6 Lombard Street', *SMiLA*, 11 (1981), pp. 83–6.

looks, from the more irregular shape of the plots in the east part of the High Street 'island', as if it was subsequently enlarged by more piecemeal encroachment.

There is no strong evidence which of these two possibilities is more likely. The apparent fluidity of medieval nomenclature for what is now Lombard Street could indicate that it originated as a residual part of a formerly larger open area, rather than as an established street in its own right.⁴² In any event, Lombard Street (and therefore the High Street island) seems to have been in existence by the early thirteenth century.

There is certainly some evidence to support the notion that Lombard Street was more than a back lane, and perhaps originally much more part of the commercial heart of the town than it is today. By the early thirteenth century Robert the Goldsmith was paying rent to the abbey for a messuage there previously held by Amfrid the Provost.⁴³ In addition, one of the medieval names for the street was 'Sheriff Lane'. Baker suggests that this may have been because the sheriff had lodgings there.⁴⁴ It seems that people of substance were connected with this street; an area which originally fronted onto (or formed part of) a market place seems a more likely location for such people than a back lane. In addition, an apparently medieval stone building stood on the south side of Lombard Street;⁴⁵ no other secular medieval stone buildings are known in Abingdon. This location also produced an unusual find of thirteenth-century Islamic glass, found in a later context (a pit containing fifteenth-century pottery) in excavations in 1982.⁴⁶

It is noticeable that the axis of the main entrance to the abbey (as defined by the abbey gateway and the orientations of the late twelfth-century church of St Nicholas and of the Hospital of St John on its north and south sides respectively) is carefully aligned on the long axis of the abbey church to the east. This seems likely to have been designed for architectural effect. If one extends this axis to the west, it passes through the site of the present-day County Hall (which may occupy the same site as its medieval predecessor, the 'Geldhall', where the abbey probably collected its dues) and towards the High Street 'island', rather than towards the heart of the present-day Market Place (Fig. 1).⁴⁷ It is possible that this was deliberate, with a new commercial area, along with the building from which the abbey administered the market, being laid out on a plan which emphasised the dominance of the abbey; Slater cites examples (Burton-upon-Trent and Coventry) of new streets being oriented on abbey gateways in order to emphasise the status of the abbey.⁴⁸ The suggestion that the Lombard Street/High Street area shows evidence of systematic medieval planning of the market place leads to a more general point about the topographical evolution of Abingdon. The name 'Bury' derives from an Old English word (*burh*), meaning 'defended enclosure'. It is possible that this refers to the remains of the Iron-Age defended *oppidum* at Abingdon. If so, the name may originally have referred to the area with the defences as a whole. It is possible that, as this area became more filled up with streets and buildings, the name 'the Bury' came to connote just the central area which remained open because it served as the market place. In that perspective, the suggested High Street/Lombard Street planning, and the High Street 'island' in particular, could be seen as part of a longer-term medieval process of structuring and filling the area within the Iron-Age defences. Draper has recently argued that the Old English word

⁴² For this fluidity see Baker, *Historic Streets of Abingdon*, pp. 11–12.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Steane, '(2a) Abingdon', pp. 83–6; G. Jones, 'Abingdon: 6 Lombard Street', *SMidLA*, 13 (1983), p. 113.

⁴⁶ Jones, 'Abingdon: 6 Lombard Street', p. 113; M. Wenzel, 'Thirteenth-Century Islamic Enamelled Glass found in Medieval Abingdon', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 3, 3 (1984), pp. 1–21.

⁴⁷ For the 'Geldhall' see Lambrick and Slade, *Two Cartularies*, vol. 2, pp. xxxvii–xxxviii.

⁴⁸ T.R. Slater, 'Medieval Town Founding on the Estates of the Benedictine Order in England', in F.-E. Eliassen and G.A. Ersland (eds.), *Power, Profit and Urban Land: Landownership in Medieval and Early Modern European Towns* (London, 1996), p. 85.

burh means specifically a high-status Saxon enclosure.⁴⁹ This need not fundamentally affect the argument advanced here, but it may indicate some re-use of the *oppidum* defences in the Saxon period. It may be relevant in this context that Abingdon was a royal vill in the tenth century.⁵⁰

DISCUSSION

This article suggests that evidence of two significant pieces of monastic town planning can be identified in the plan of Abingdon. The first seems to have been aimed at delimiting the abbey precinct, establishing a vineyard on the edge of the precinct and creating blocks of land which could be used for tenements; people with close connections with the abbey were housed in some of these tenements, which also produced rents for the abbey. Planned secular fringes around monastic precincts have also been identified at Gloucester (probably dating to the eleventh century),⁵¹ and at Leominster in Herefordshire (early twelfth century).⁵² The second piece of planning seems to have been intended to enlarge the market area and to increase the length of commercial frontage available. This was presumably done to take full advantage of the economic opportunities provided by the general growth in the market economy in the medieval period. These suggested episodes of planning can be set in a wider historical context, both nationally and locally.

Abingdon, with its early origins, apparent original topographic focus on St Helen's church, later establishment of a market place at the gates of the abbey, and subsequent expansion stands as one of a number of monastic and other towns with long and complex histories which witnessed multiple episodes of town planning ('composite towns' in Slater's terms).⁵³ Market places are commonly found at the gates of both pre- and post-Conquest monastic houses. Aston and Bond cite Abingdon as one of a number of towns in which a market place was established outside a pre-Conquest monastery. At Evesham (Worcs.), Peterborough (Northants.), Ely (Cambs.), and Bury St Edmunds (Suff.) an original pre-Conquest market area seems later to have been supplemented with additional commercial space.⁵⁴ This leads on to the question of the chronology of those elements of Abingdon's plan which are described above.

Post-Roman town founding and town planning started before the Norman Conquest, but the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in particular saw a great expansion of the market economy and of urban settlements in England (and in western Europe generally).⁵⁵ Existing towns grew and new ones were founded. Lords of all kinds, including monastic ones, were closely involved in this activity as a means of increasing their revenues.⁵⁶ Benedictine houses had a particularly strong urban focus.

Large-scale town planning was common at this time. It is most easily detected in those towns which were entirely new foundations, laid out in a single operation ('single phase' towns) but can also be seen in places with more complex histories and where there may have been a series of planning episodes.⁵⁷ Creating new areas of tenements, expanding the area available for market stalls, and establishing livestock markets on the edges of towns all occurred at this time.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ S. Draper, 'The Significance of Old English *Burh* in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 15 (2008), pp. 240–53.

⁵⁰ Kelly, *Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, vol. 1, p. ccix.

⁵¹ N. Baker and R. Holt, *Urban Growth and the Medieval Church* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 45–7.

⁵² I am indebted to Nigel Baker for drawing my attention to this example.

⁵³ T.R. Slater, 'English Medieval New Towns with Composite Plans: Evidence from the Midlands', in T.R. Slater (ed.), *The Built Form of Western Cities* (Leicester University Press, 1990), pp. 60–82.

⁵⁴ J. Bond, *Monastic Landscapes* (Stroud, 2004), pp. 279–93.

⁵⁵ Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 187.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 146.

⁵⁷ Slater, 'English Medieval New Towns', pp. 60–82.

⁵⁸ Dyer, *Making and Living*, p. 197.

This wider picture, along with the specific history of Abingdon and its abbey, provides a context for the developments discussed above. As noted, the settlement at Abingdon already had a resident population of traders by 1086 at the latest, and most writers have located them at the gates of the abbey, in the area of the present-day Market Place.

The early twelfth century was a time of great activity at the abbey, which included much building and rebuilding under Faricius (abbot from 1100–17). Further building was undertaken by Abbots Vincent (1120–30) and Ingulf (1130–58).⁵⁹ As we have seen, the twelfth century also saw disputes over Abingdon's market rights, with complaints being made to Henry I and (by the men of Wallingford and Oxford) to Henry II. The essence of the complaints was that there had not traditionally been a market at Abingdon, or that it had only been a limited one.⁶⁰ It seems that Abingdon's commercial rivals felt threatened by what was happening at Abingdon market in the first half of the twelfth century. An expansion of the market area at Abingdon may have been one of the causes of this tension; equally, the confirmation of Abingdon's rights in 1163 could have been a boost to growth which led to extra market space being needed. In this context, it is notable that the area of the present (and presumed 'original') Market Place at Abingdon is quite small, even allowing for some later encroachment: around half a hectare at most. By contrast, Wallingford's market place covers about 1.5 hectares, and those of Thame and Burford over 2 hectares. This could explain why it was apparently necessary to expand the market area at Abingdon.

The planned elements of Abingdon described above therefore seem most likely to have been created in the twelfth century, since the Vineyard was first mentioned in the late twelfth century, and Lombard Street was in existence by the early thirteenth. This proposed dating is also consistent with such direct archaeological evidence as there is. More generally, whereas pottery earlier than the twelfth century is not especially abundant in Abingdon, pottery (and rubbish pits) of the twelfth or thirteenth century onwards are frequently found.⁶¹ It may also be noted that St Nicholas's church is first mentioned in documents of 1184, and also appears on architectural grounds to have been built at around this time.⁶²

Thus, while the medieval planned elements of Abingdon are not as evident as those of, say, Thame or Burford, they certainly seem to be present. This is entirely consistent with the urban orientation of the Benedictine order as a whole. It is also notable that one of the two elements discussed above was closely bound up with defining and controlling the perimeter of the abbey precinct, while the other was concerned with increasing the commercial potential of the market at Abingdon. Both of these things will surely have been central concerns of the monastic community at Abingdon.

Finally, it has been suggested that the probable minster church of St Helen provided a topographical focus for Abingdon at a time before a market place was established at the abbey's gate.⁶³ If so, the establishment and expansion of the market area, closer to the abbey and under its control, may be seen as part of a process by which (from perhaps the mid or late eleventh century onwards, or possibly even as early as the later tenth century) the abbey sought to exert control over, and to profit from, the growing commercial importance of Abingdon. This was certainly the source of much friction with the townspeople of Abingdon later in the Middle Ages. St Helen's church seems to have been a gathering place for those who instigated a riot against the abbey in 1327, and the abbey's administration of Abingdon's market was a major focus of that discontent.⁶⁴ In that light, the distinctive medieval topography of Abingdon can perhaps be seen as reflecting

⁵⁹ Hudson, *Historia Ecclesie Abendonensis*, vol. 2, pp. xlvi, cii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* pp. lxxxi–ii.

⁶¹ M. Parrington and C. Balkwill, 'Excavations at Broad Street, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, 40 (1975), pp. 34–44; M. Parrington, 'Excavations at the Old Gaol, Abingdon', *ibid.* pp. 67–70.

⁶² Preston, *St Nicholas*, p. 10; G. Tyack, S. Bradley, and N. Pevsner, *Berkshire* (London, 2010), p. 53.

⁶³ Biddle, Lambrick, and Myres, 'Early History of Abingdon and its Abbey', p. 26.

⁶⁴ Townsend, *History of Abingdon*, p. 31; Lambrick and Slade, *Two Cartularies*, vol. 2, pp. xxxviii–xlii.

the wider tension between the seigneurial dominance of the abbey and the townspeople's desire for self-government.

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