

The Abingdon Monks' Map

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SUMMARY

This study concerns a mid-sixteenth-century map of the river Thames from Abingdon to Radley, which was preserved in the archives of the Verney family and acquired the popular name of 'The Monks' map' when it was given to the Corporation of Abingdon in 1907. The map gives detailed information about the landscape of this part of the Thames valley four hundred and fifty years ago. It is compared with a second map of the river Thames of similar date, known as the Blacknall or Claydon map. This was produced to support the claims of William Blacknall, a Wiltshire and Berkshire mill-owner, in a lawsuit of 1570. His mill-owning and fishery rights were being challenged by George Stonehouse of Radley. It is argued that the Monks' map was also produced to assist William Blacknall in his litigation.

On the wall overlooking the top flight of stairs of the Guildhall, Abingdon, is a frame containing a long coloured and annotated strip map of the river Thames between Abingdon and Radley. For reasons stated below, it seems to be mid-sixteenth century in date. It was probably used in a lawsuit which broke out in 1570 between George Stonehouse of Radley and William Blacknall of Swallowfield, Wiltshire, over disputed milling and fishing rights. The map itself throws interesting light on the landscape of the Thames valley, as well as affording insights into the various economic interests connected with the river at the time.

The way in which the Corporation of Abingdon became the owners of the map is straightforward. A. E. Preston, in a letter to J. N. L. Baker of the Oxford University School of Geography, dated 28 April 1937,¹ explained that William Blacknall's great-granddaughter Mary, and sole heiress of the Blacknall family, at the age of 14, in 1629, married Ralph, the eldest son of Sir Edmund Verney of Claydon, Buckinghamshire. At the time of the marriage both the parents were dead, and Mary had been made a ward of court. By reason of this marriage, the site of Abingdon Abbey, the Thames fishery, and other property passed into the hands of the Verney family, and with the inheritance went the deeds and documents of title, including the old map.

Sir Edmund Verney decided to offer it to the Abingdon Town Council in 1907. In a letter dated 2 July 1907 he attributed the date of the map to the reign of Henry VI and stated that he had consulted various experts of the British Museum and elsewhere as to what had better be done with this valuable and interesting roll.² At the time of writing it was with William Grisbrook, of 69 Endell Street, London, who was prepared to mount it on a board and frame it for six to ten pounds. In the event, the corporation accepted the gift and had it framed and hung in a position of honour.

In its original form it was made up of four sheets of vellum glued together. From left to right they were 53 cm, 75 cm, 69 cm, and 76 cm long. Its overall length is 265.5 cm, it is 41.5 cm broad, and is coloured with paints apparently using oil as a medium. (See fold-out map.) It is likely to have been stored rolled up. It is orientated with north at the top, and the long side runs east to west. Beginning with the left-hand sheet, which covers the western end, we notice that this sheet has been trimmed after the map had been painted. The cut has probably removed about 20 cm, if we accept that all four sheets of vellum were originally the same size. At the other end there are a number of small holes in the top right corner, suggesting perforation by drawing-pins. It

¹ BRO EP/7/90NGG.

² BRO EP/7/90.

is possible that the map was trimmed to remove a ragged corner. The cut has been done rather unskillfully, so we are left with an angle of about 100°. Another possibility is that the map was damaged at this end. There is certainly a large area of flaking and erasure at the left-hand end.

The river Thames, painted in pale blue with a brown line outlining its banks, is the main feature of this and all the other sheets. Starting at the left-hand end, progressing to the right and upstream, we notice that the channel divides, and there is a small island to the west of Burford Bridge. The damaged inscription 'Th[e] hole [Th]ames' is written upside down in the centre of the river. The island now extends right up to the bridge. The medieval bridge was built in 1416, when licence was given to the Guild of the Holy Cross to construct the two bridges at Burford and Culham and a causeway between them.

The bridge is painted brown and is depicted with seven arches and cutwaters in between. South of the bridge the road on the causeway is shown curving away towards the south-west, across the Isle of Andersey. The Burford bridge is in fact divided into a north and south section and consists of seven and six spans respectively.³ The Monks' map appears to contain the oldest pictorial representation of the bridge, but there is also a painting showing the bridge under construction, probably sixteenth century in date, in the hall of the almshouses at Long Alley, Abingdon, belonging to Christ's Hospital.

North of the bridge is an attempt to represent the town of Abingdon. At the western end are two houses with vermilion roof tiles and white walls. Then comes a drawing of a church, with a tower, nave, and porch. The walls are painted white and the roof blue. Are we looking here at a map-maker's stereotype, or is it a genuine attempt to portray an actual building?⁴ The position of the roads drawn below it suggests that these are meant to represent East and West St Helen's Streets. If this is so, the church can hardly represent St Helen's Church, despite the fact that this is an important landmark from the river. Furthermore, the tower has had a spire since the thirteenth century. The Blacknall or Claydon map, described below (see Plate 7) indeed has a church in the same position, which with its spire and annotation is unequivocally St Helen's. Which, then, is the church in the Monks' map? Another possibility is that it is St Edmund's Chapel. We know that St Edmund's had a belfry in 1469–70: 'et in reparacione et emendacione capelli sancti Edmundi et campanilis eiusdem xxxiii iiiiid'.⁵ St Edmund's tower was pulled down before 1554,⁶ and so if this is the church shown on the map, it confirms other evidence that this map was made before the middle of the sixteenth century.

The group of houses to the far left may well be abbey properties in Ock Street. Amyce's later survey of 1554 names properties held by the abbey here in Bridge Street, formerly Burford Street, and Butcher's Row.⁷

The group of houses to the east of the church is a schematic representation of the town of Abingdon. In the centre is a public building with three arches, a pyramidal blue-grey roof, and a large cross. This could be one or a combination of features from both of two buildings in the market place mentioned by Leland: 'There is a right goodly crosse of stone with fair degrees and imagerie in the market steede at Abingdon'.⁸ There is a painted representation of the cross on the end of the Long Alley almshouses, and it apparently served as a model for the cross at Coventry

³ In 1416 the Crown licensed the construction: *CPR, 1416–22*, p. 33. For observations and analysis of the fifteenth-century Burford Bridge see H. E. Salter and J. J. Leeming, 'Burford Bridge, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, 2 (1937), pp. 134–40. See also D. Harris, *The Bridges of Medieval England* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 119, 134–5, 175–6, 196, 205–6, 219–20.

⁴ Very similar conventions for marking towns are seen in the fourteenth-century Gough map: see N. Millea, *The Gough Map* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 33–4.

⁵ R. E. G. Kirk, ed., *Accounts of the Obedientiars of Abingdon Abbey*, Camden Society, ns 51 (London, 1892), p. 138.

⁶ *VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 433. W. J. H. Liversidge 'The thirteenth-century Chapel of St Edmund', in W. J. H. Liversidge and M. J. H. Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays: Studies in Local History* (Abingdon, 1989), p. 3, makes this suggestion.

⁷ Roger Amyce's Survey of Abingdon (1554), Records of Christ's Hospital Abingdon, Abingdon Borough Archives; Land Revenue Misc. Books (PRO), no. 187, fols 196–221.

⁸ Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed., *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales* (London, 1964), 7, p. 122.

and was set up as a symbol of their order by the Guild of the Holy Cross in the reign of Henry VI.⁹ It was fifty feet high and was destroyed by the Puritans in 1644. The other possibility is that it may be the market house mentioned by Leland: 'There is also a fair house with open pillars covered with a rofe of leade for market folkes.'¹⁰ This would have been the successor to the market house burned down in the 1327 riots and replaced in its turn before 1569.

The next feature is the Stert stream, which runs parallel to Stert Street and is now culverted under St Nicholas's Church. The water can, in fact, be heard running under the church, and there is a relieving arch in the passage opposite the south side of the church.¹¹ It is shown on the Monks' map as an open waterway, running alongside and outside the precinct wall of the abbey. This is portrayed on the map as tiled and painted red. The abbey site itself has been largely obliterated by an over-painting in mauve, but the fragmentary place-name 'the Abby' can be made out. The fact of the over-painting suggests that the map was made before or just after the abbey buildings were destroyed. It fits in with the idea that the survey was made before or just after the Dissolution. By the time of Blacknall's purchase, in 1553, demolition within the former precinct was well advanced. The church (except one or both of the west towers), the cloister, chapter house, dorter, and frater had all been pulled down.¹² A good many more buildings had been destroyed before 1579, including the monks' infirmary, the vestry of the abbey church, the charnel chapel, and the monks' kitchen. For some years the abbey site continued to serve as a quarry for the town.

The map shows some sort of canalized watercourse round the north and east sides. At the eastern end of the Abbey House gardens there is still a ditch and a pool, which may be survivals of this complex. There are certainly references to watercourses from the fourteenth century – they include expenses about the moat ('circa fossam') in 1369–7, to 'clearing the great moat' ('in mundacione magne fosse') in 1388–9, to fishing baskets bought for taking fish in the moat of the convent ('in fossato conventus'), and to the 'convent dytche' in 1585.¹³

The mill dam, depicted as a wall, goes across the millstream to the south of the abbey to the island which is now the site of the Upper Reaches Hotel. The corn mills and the fulling mills are not clearly differentiated in the Monks' map, but the Claydon map makes an attempt to separate them. On the island created between the millstream and the main course of the Thames are several buildings. Those to the left are connected with fishponds. The two houses are white walled, with red roofs, and are separated by a watercourse from four small, white rectangular areas, which are probably representations of more fishponds. The annotation 'ye fisheres close' can be made out. The pittancer's account of 1322–3 makes reference to the purchase of fish for stocking the fishpond ('ad vivarium instaurandum'),¹⁴ and the kitchener's account mentions a payment for cleansing the fishpond ('pro vivario mundando') before 1377.¹⁵ We shall notice below that in the last days of the monastery the abbots were zealous in promoting their fishing interests on the open river. The 1570 lawsuit produced a number of long-lived fishermen, such as John Betterton, who declared that the monastery had a piscatorial monopoly before the Dissolution.¹⁶

In the centre of the island are 'Walnuttre Eyght' and 'Brewerne Hayse'. There are certainly records of sales of nuts in the gardener's accounts for 1388–9 ('de fructibus venditis viz pomis, wardon, et

⁹ *VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 433.

¹⁰ *Leland's Itinerary*, 1, p. 122.

¹¹ An arch over the Stert is mentioned at the end of the twelfth century (*VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 436), but this stream was apparently an open ditch until the 1790s, when the first Abingdon paving act was passed: Arthur E. Preston, *The Church and Parish of St Nicholas, Abingdon, and Other Papers* (Oxford, 1929), p. 171.

¹² A series of articles by Agnes C. Baker, based on the Verney deeds, is found in the *North Berks Herald* of 27 June, 18 July, 1 August, 8 August, 15 August, 22 August, and 27 August 1952, and traces in detail the fate of the abbey buildings.

¹³ Kirk, *Accounts of the Obedientiars*, pp. 19, 54, 130, 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Verney deeds, calendared in BRO D/EPT/87, no. 47.

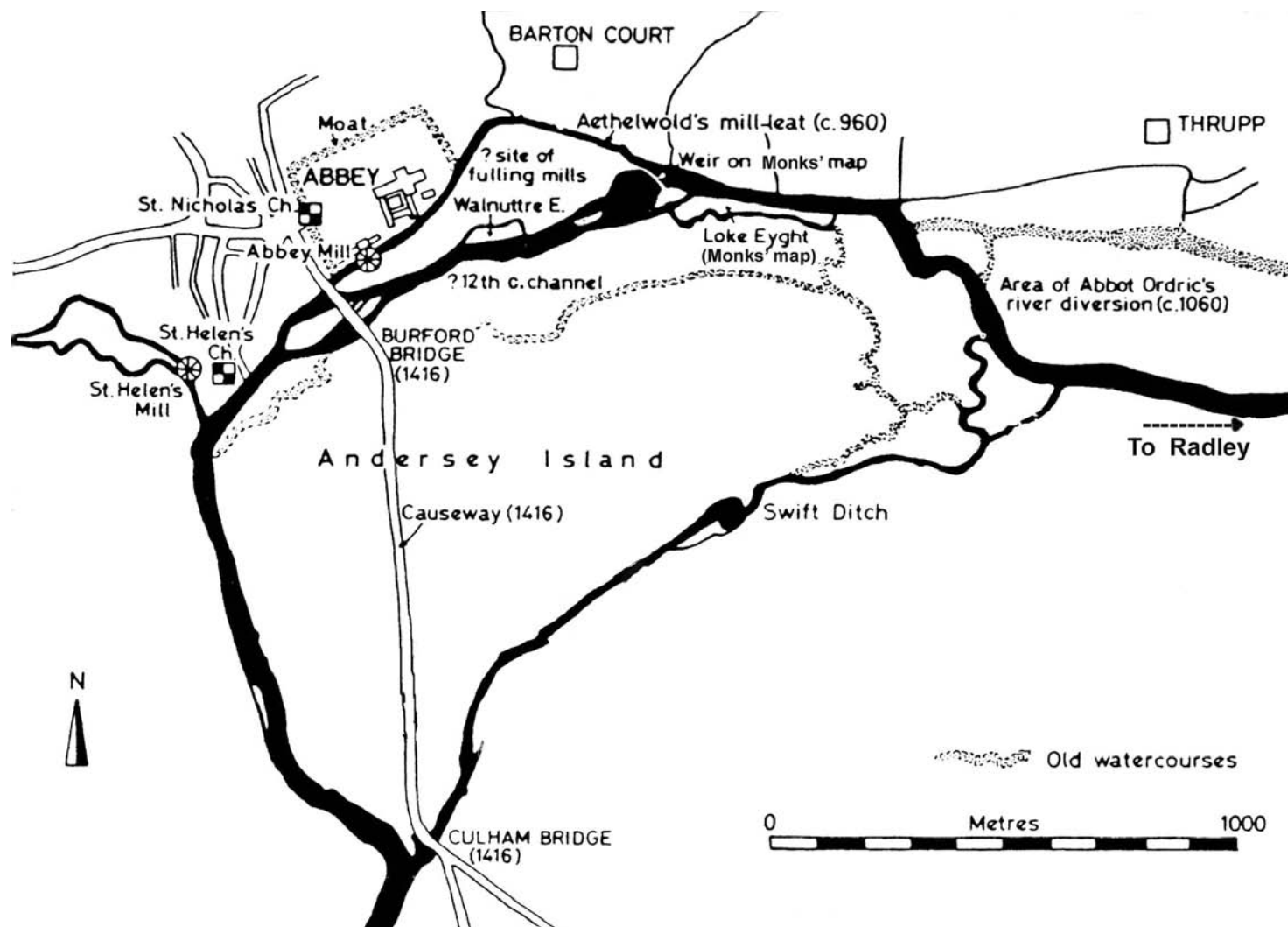


Fig. 1. Waterways surrounding Abingdon, tenth to sixteenth centuries (after James Bond)

nucibus').¹⁷ Brewerne Hayse is described in a covenant of 1639 as a meadow of twenty acres lying between the lock and the Brickhouse Close and between the Thames and the millstream.¹⁸

Across the river, to the north, is a small wedge-shaped field called 'Pitten[s] close'. An area called the pittancery covered three acres of marshy ground.¹⁹ This may be the land which later belonged to the corporation called the 'Prytany', where the broken victuals from the abbey are said to have been distributed to the poor. The pittancer's account of 1369–70 includes expenses in repairing the pittancery houses, 'domorum pitancerie', and the gates and bridges there were repaired in 1369–70.²⁰

The next group of buildings can be firmly identified with Barton Court. Barton was the centre of one of the abbey's estates since before the Norman Conquest.²¹ A large mansion of the abbots of Abingdon was built here shortly after 1338, and the manor went to the Crown at the Dissolution. In 1547 Thomas Reade possessed it. The map labels the main building as 'Barten House'. The house as depicted has four gables, is red roofed and white walled, and is three storeys in height. It has a central chimney. Three suggestions may be made. We may be looking at a cartographic conventional symbol for a large house. A second possibility is that we may be looking at the medieval predecessor. If the map is pre-Reformation in date, we can perhaps rule out the possibility that it may be the new dwelling house built about 1554 out of stone from the tower of the abbey church, then in course of demolition. In front of it is a second building, rectangular in plan, with a door at the east end and a central chimney. A circular buff-coloured building, which may be a dovecot, is down between Barton Court and the loop of the river which encloses 'Barnestage Eyght'. The adjoining building is depicted as being half-timbered with a tiled roof and no windows or chimneys. It is apparently a large barn. Below it is a field name 'Purle Close', separated from 'Myery Close' by a field boundary. The parish boundary, which formerly ran between Abingdon and St Helen Without, is shown as a zigzag thick black line to the west of Barton Court.

The complex of features on the Monks' map around 'the loke' can nearly all be identified on the modern map. (See Fig. 1.) The lock itself is drawn in black ink and is of the flash-lock type, with five sluices and paddles. A flash lock was simply a section of the river which could be opened by raising the paddles (or 'spades') so as to allow water to rush through. The rush of water was called a flash. The boatmen going downstream would 'shoot' it like a waterfall. When they went upstream they needed a longer 'flash', waiting until the level of water had been somewhat lowered before attempting to haul the boat up with winch and tackle.²² The whole procedure was dangerous, there were frequent drownings, and it was expensive: millers charged heavily for a flash.

Below the lock depicted on the map, and broadening out, is 'Ye loke pole [pool]'. To the north-west are 'loke eyght' and [illegible] 'ent pole'. Below, and to the south of 'loke pole', is an illegible word followed by 'eyght'.

The map reminds us of a problem connected with river usage that goes back at least two and a half centuries. In 1316 the men of Oxfordshire and Berkshire complained that the abbot of Abingdon and other men of those counties who had weirs on the river Thames, between the towns of Oxford and Wallingford, had 'reconstructed them of such a height that the lands on each side are flooded and have constructed certain obstacles on the weirs which are called lokes by which ships and boats laden with victuals are unable to pass to the town of Oxford'.²³ There are a number of references to the abbey weirs in the treasurer's account for 1375–6: 18*d.* was paid

¹⁷ Kirk, *Accounts of the Obedientiars*, p. 53.

¹⁸ Preston papers, BRO, D/EP7/238/4, no. 986.

¹⁹ M. Biddle, H. T. Lambrick, and J. N. L. Myres, 'The early history of Abingdon, Berkshire and its abbey', *MedArch*, 12 (1968), pp. 54–5.

²⁰ Kirk, *Accounts of the Obedientiars*, pp. 3, 19.

²¹ *VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 418.

²² This description is based on that in R. H. C. Davis, 'The ford, the river and the city', *Oxoniensia*, 38 (1973), p. 265.

²³ *CPR, 1313–17*, p. 501.



Fig. 2. The largely vegetation-choked course of the Swift ditch, the main navigation channel of the Thames before the eleventh century. (Photograph by author.)

to two carpenters for mending the chapter weir; boards, cords, nails, gadnayl, and bordnayl cost 8s.9d. In the same year a new weir was built, and the large sum of £24 8s.6d. was paid to William Burford for its construction.²⁴ The outlay included cake-bread, beer, and also piles. It is of course possible that the weir mentioned was downriver at the abbey mills, where the Claydon map shows a similar construction.

The irregularly shaped island to the east is 'locke eyght' and is bounded by a long, narrow, and twisting waterway known as 'shire lake'. South of 'shire lake' is 'longe mede lyinge in the Isys'. The main stream of the river is referred to as 'the hole Thames' – again this is written upside down. The two drainage ditches to the east of Barton Court are both still visible in the modern landscape, although they are truncated by the branch railway which joins the main line south of Radley.

The river, according to the Monks' map, is divided into two channels some way to the east of this point. Each of these channels has several islands. The modern course of the Thames runs in the southern of these two channels, and the northern one has diminished to a mere drainage ditch in width, running over swampy ground. The old course and even the ancient islands can be traced in the modern landscape, despite the fact that the channel is blocked with sedge. The *Abingdon Chronicle* appears to contain a reference to the diversion of the Thames in the vicinity of Thrupp in the mid-eleventh century, during the time of Abbot Ordric, which might account for the two parallel channels.²⁵

The large meadow to the north was called 'Brewern ye mystris Reades'. The island to the south of this is described on the map as 'Nyatt w[i]thin the thythyng of Thrupe [Thrupp] lyinge in the pary[s]he of Seynt Marie in Abingdon and beinge in Mr. Lyen's lordsh[ip]'. Thrupp had been granted, together with Wick and Kennington, to John Lyon in Edward VI's reign.²⁶

²⁴ Kirk, *Accounts of the Obedientiars*, pp. 27–8, 31, 43–4, 119.

²⁵ *Chronicon monasterii de Abingdon*, ed. J. Stevenson, RS 2 (1858), 1, p. 480, 2, p. 282. I owe this reference to C. J. Bond.

²⁶ *VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 414.



Fig. 3. The junction of the Swift ditch and the main course of the river Thames.
(*Photograph by author.*)

The meadows to the south of the southern course of the Thames are marked on the map as 'Swonye Mede' and 'Kytinye' [?] twice. One feature is conspicuous by its absence. There is no attempt to show the course of the Swift ditch as a navigable waterway. Thacker, writing in 1914, is clear that 'this now confined and grown-up channel was from the early middle ages the main navigation course of the Thames.'²⁷ (See Fig. 2.) A. E. Preston noticed this omission and in some manuscript notes for a lecture on the river at Abingdon made some useful comments.²⁸ He thought it strange that if the main navigable channel of the Thames at this date ran along the Swift ditch, it was not so shown. He commented, however, that the main purpose of the map was not to show the navigable channels, but to illustrate William Blacknall's various rights. However, if we take the map's evidence as correct, it would confirm that the navigable channel at that date followed the same course as at present (see Fig. 3).

Alternatively, it is possible that despite its existence in the early Middle Ages, it might have become blocked by the time the map was made. Its correct position is marked by two narrow, parallel white lines, which together may mark its course. Preston also points out that in 1538, on the dismantling of part of the abbey, church stones, lead, and timber which were sent to London and to Windsor for the kings's use were all conveyed in carts to Culham to be loaded into barges. He thinks that this great expense would not have been incurred if there had been a navigable channel for this class of traffic in Abingdon itself. The Swift ditch was in fact reopened by the Oxford-Burcot Commission of 1624, which introduced a pound lock at its head and retained a weir about halfway along it.

Moving eastwards we pass a piece of meadow between two drainage ditches, marked on the map as 'Car... ye', and then we come to a group of two buildings entitled '...s house in Thrupe grene'. Each of the buildings is apparently of two storeys. The one nearer the river has a door in

²⁷ Fred S. Thacker, *The Thames Highway*, 2 (London, 1914), pp. 153–4.

²⁸ BRO D/EP7/90.

the middle and a central chimney. The one lying behind and parallel to it has a large door and three windows in the south wall, but no chimneys. It may be a barn. The building now on the site is known as Thrupp Cottages, and the western part of the house running east-west is possibly the same as the one marked on the map. An eastern wing has been added, since the map was made, probably in the seventeenth century. There is a rectangular parch mark in the field behind the house, which seems to fit exactly the siting and approximate size of the barn. The map shows a garden hedge round both buildings. To the east of this is 'Thrupe grene Mr. Lyens ti[t]le and comen'.

The northern course of the river has an inscription, largely illegible except for 'Tup [Thrupp?] watre alias [Nyatt]fo[rd]'; but the islands in its course are named clearly. From east to west is 'forde eyght alias taneres eyght'. A thick line has been drawn, apparently in lead pencil at the approximate site of the ford. It goes across the river by way of the island. The next island a 'Wytani eyght', then comes another 'Wytame eyght', 'apes eyght', and '...unt eyght'. Below the island, and south of the southern course of the Thames, is 'a mede belonging to the pars[o]nage of Culla[m]'. The two small islands in this southern course are 'swanes eyght' and 'Bystel eyght'. The large island to the north of these is described as 'beinge Mistris Reade'. To the east of this island, where the two courses of the river join again, are 'Spelsberys home lyeinge in Gosye' and 'Pontenes eyght lyeinge in Gosye'. To the south is 'h...l sune's eyght', and south of the main course of the river is 'Bystel mede'.

Moving eastwards there are two short watercourses debouching into the Thames and dark lines which may indicate hedgerows or linear strips of woodland. The blocks of land so demarcated are 'Sandehull Mr Lyon's ground', and the next is 'Bullares home'. The very considerable stretch of meadow is 'Mr Redes mede calyd Stockye'. The wood across the river is entitled 'Newnam Wode'. It is still there, lying to the south of Nuneham Park, and is now called Lock Wood. It is painted dark green, with individual trees marked in, their trunks painted in mauve and their foliage in darker green.

THE BLACKNALL OR CLAYDON MAP

A second map, also dating from the mid-sixteenth century and covering roughly the same area as the Monks' map has survived in the Verney archive at Claydon (see Plate 7). To begin with, the so-called Blacknall map is centred on Abingdon and the waters round it. Unlike the Monks' map, it extends in the west (left) to Culham and thus includes Sutton Mill. The central part round Abingdon itself is more detailed and on a larger scale. It concertinas to the east and to the right and extends to Nuneham Lock, but at the cost of cartographic accuracy. The last feature marked on the map is a village consisting of nine houses and a church with a tower, which must be Radley, despite the fact that the scale of the map is distorted badly at this point. Given that the focus of the map-maker's interest was the river, it is likely that this settlement was put in because it was just about visible on the horizon from the river. The houses are painted with white walls and red roofs which, as we have noticed before, is the map-maker's convention for buildings. Again, as on the Monks' map, the church is shown as having a blue roof and white walls. The end of the map, at its furthest eastern point, shows the river widening and dividing, as it does today, somewhere near Lock Bridge.

With regard to the date, it would seem that both maps date after 1547, when Thomas Reade possessed Barton Court, and probably after 1553–8, for John Lyons was granted Thrupp, together with Wick and Kennington, in Edward VI's reign. Blacknall himself gained the site of the abbey in 1553.

There are differences between the two maps, which suggest that they may have been produced to illustrate different aspects of a lawsuit of 1570. George Stonehouse, the lord of the manor of Radley, and Elizabeth, his wife, sued William Blacknall, of Swallowfield, Wiltshire, and Richard

Tesdale in the Court of Requests for damage done to their interests and those of their tenants in Radley.²⁹ The litigation was concerned primarily with the perennial question of the raising of the level of Abingdon lock, which led to the flooding of the islands in the Thames and some of the lands adjoining it and threatened the livelihood of those who depended on them, mainly Stonehouse's tenants. But it threw up a number of other issues about fisheries and mills and the rights connected with them, and about the status of the parish of Radley.

The Blacknall map has been the subject of study by Manfred and Jessica Brod, who have noted and tabulated the connections between it and the Monks' map.³⁰ When the annotations on the two maps are compared, however, some significant differences emerge. These suggest that the makers of the Monks' map were intent on locating features connected with the waters, whereas the Blacknall map-makers were more interested in pinpointing the possessors of land and rights. Whereas the Monks' map mentions landowners eight times (Mr Reade three times, Mr Lyons four, and the parsonage of Culham one), the Blacknall map mentions landowners twenty-two times (Mr Reade twice, Mr Lyons three times, Mr Stonehouse twice, Culham three times, the king twice, John Lane once, and Blacknall no less than nine times). Another significant difference between the two maps is that the Monks' map mentions water features (eyots, mills, fishing places) nineteen times, while the Blacknall map refers to water features only nine times. Water features and possession of land and rights were both aspects of the 1570 lawsuit.

THE 1570 LAWSUIT AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE MONKS' MAP

The steps whereby William Blacknall obtained an interest in the river Thames, with its mills and disputed fishing rights, take us back to the Middle Ages. The river Thames around Abingdon has been the subject of much human intervention and exploitation over a thousand years. Three main issues emerged - those of navigation, milling, and fishing. According to the abbey *Chronicle*, the citizens of Oxford requested consent in the time of Abbot Ordric (1052–65) to divert the navigable channel through the abbot's meadow to the south, to allow their vessels passage upstream, bypassing dangerous shallows near Barton Court.³¹ The boatmen agreed to pay one hundred herrings a year to the abbey cellars, but thereafter were taken to court by the abbot for failing to keep to their promise. The *Chronicle* also records a second river diversion to improve navigation upstream near Thrupp. John Leland, who visited Abingdon in the early sixteenth century, recorded that the present mainstream on the north-west side of the Andersey island was the result of another diversion undertaken in the time of Abbot Faritius (1100–17).³² It apparently relocated the channel nearer the abbey. How much traffic was generated by these improvements is unknown. Davis argued that mills and weirs disrupted traffic along the Thames,³³ but Peberdy has recently stated a case for continued river use during the Middle Ages.³⁴ Blair, on the other hand, argues that a cycle of decline set in.³⁵ The diminishing attractiveness of water transport had an adverse effect on maintenance. Such channels as the ones described above became increasingly silted and weed choked. At the end of the Middle Ages much of the Thames traffic halted at Henley-on-Thames and transferred to land transport. It does not seem likely that navigation

²⁹ The sources for the 1570 lawsuit are in TNA, PRO, Court of Requests 2/74/ 73 and 2/89/51. These consist of lists of questions (interrogatories) put to witnesses and their depositions.

³⁰ (Ref. 12/1/127). A bromide photograph is in the Bodleian Library (Ref. Shmk (F) c/7:Abingdon (3)). I have used the Brods' tables (a copy of which is in the Town Council offices, Abingdon) in the succeeding paragraph.

³¹ C. J. Bond, *Monastic Landscapes* (London, 2004), p. 304.

³² *Leland's Itinerary*, 1, p. 122.

³³ Davis, 'The ford, the river, and the city', pp. 258–67.

³⁴ Robert Peberdy 'Navigation on the River Thames between London and Oxford in the late Middle Ages. A reconsideration', *Oxoniensia*, 61 (1996), pp. 311–40.

³⁵ John Blair, ed., *Waterways and Canal Building in Medieval England* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 255–94.



Fig. 4. View from Burford Bridge, looking east towards the site of the abbey mill. The few remaining buildings of the abbey, mainly administrative in purpose, can be seen beyond the left-hand arch of the bridge. This branch of the Thames is at the western end of Æthelwold's mill leat, c.960. (Photograph by author.)

was the principal issue in the map-maker's mind. It is not mentioned in the voluminous papers accompanying various lawsuits which occurred in the sixteenth century.

When we turn to the question of watermills we are much closer to one of the principal *casus belli* which generated the Monks' map, or at least provided a use for the map in pursuing a case in law. During the Middle Ages the mills to the south of the abbey site had belonged to the monks of Abingdon Abbey (see Fig. 4). Abbot Æthelwold (c.954–63) is said to have diverted part of the Thames into a mill leat and dug a sewerage channel from the abbey reredorter (that is, the monastic lavatories!).³⁶ The abbey *Chronicle* is unequivocal: 'Fecit etiam molendina quae stant sub curia.'³⁷ Æthelwold, who came from Glastonbury, may well have acquired his interest and experience in civil engineering schemes involving the control of water there. He went to Winchester later on in his career and carried out similar schemes.³⁸

Towards the end of the Middle Ages there were at least three watermills here under one roof. A crown lease, dated 1539, granted them to John Wellesborne, Esq., together with the millponds and watercourses in Abingdon 'formerly belonging to the lately dissolved monastery', with the fishery of the waters in Abingdon (together with some other lands), for a term of twenty-one years at a rent of £28 6s. 8d.³⁹ It seems that Sir John Wellesborne granted parts of this lease to a miller called William Elyott of Abingdon in 1540. At this point one of the protagonists of the 1570 lawsuit enters the stage.

William Blacknall was the son of Richard Blacknall of Wing, Buckinghamshire, and a miller of Swallowfield, Wiltshire. While still described as a yeoman of Hambledon, Buckinghamshire, his

³⁶ C. J. Bond, 'Canal construction. An introductory review', in Blair, ed., *Waterways and Canal Building*, p. 179.

³⁷ *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, 2, p. 278.

³⁸ Martin Biddle and Derek J. Keene, 'Winchester in the eleventh and twelfth centuries', in Martin Biddle, ed., *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages: an Edition and Discussion of the Winton Domesday*, Winchester Studies, 1 (Oxford, 1976), esp. pp. 283–3.

³⁹ Verney Deeds, no. 5.

wife's home village, he acquired an interest in the abbey mills at Abingdon. In 1548 William Elyott assigned to him the lease of three corn mills under one roof in the town of Abingdon, together with the locks and fisheries of all 'the waters of The Thamysse crekes and plashes thereunto belonging' and two houses in Abingdon called the Fishery Houses.⁴⁰ A year later we find William Bury, merchant of the Staple of Calais, now owning the crown lease by lawful conveyance. He granted to Blacknall a term of nine years in the reserved fishery of the water 'going from the drawbridge into a close called the Convent Orchard and the waters going into the Pitanssey Ditch at a yearly rate of 6s-8d.'⁴¹ Blacknall gradually increased his hold on lands and rights along this stretch of the river Thames. In 1553 he bought the site and remaining buildings of Abingdon Abbey from Sir Thomas Wrothe for £600.⁴² He conveyed to Thomas Kente all his interest in the crown lease of 1549 of the site of the fulling mill 'then being in ruin and decay in Abingdon, next the three watermills there, with the house called the Cosenan's House or Inne for the term of ten years',⁴³ Kente paid him £330. Blacknall was clearly going up in the world. He is no longer described as a yeoman, but as a gentleman. His interest in milling was furthered by a lease for forty years of the Sheprige Mills in Swallowfield, together with the 'mansion house wherein the said William dwelleth called the Mill House'.⁴⁴

We now come to the grant which is referred to so frequently in the 1570 lawsuit. Eleven years before, on 12 March 1559, an indenture made between the mayor, bailiffs, and burgesses of Abingdon recorded a grant in perpetuity to William Blacknall of Swallowfield and his heirs of the following:

The three water mills under one roof in Abingdon commonly called the abbey mylnes otherwise Beyne mylnes and two fulling mills thereto adjacent with all profits etc of all the waters stagnant and running with appurtenances belonging to the fisheries from Stockeymeade against Newnham [Nuneham Courtenay] lock on the east to the water in the tenure of John Lane, parcel of the possessions of Christ's Hospital on the west.⁴⁵

Further fisheries stretching from the east end of Christ's Hospital fisheries and extending down to Sutton Courtenay ('as a certain stone afixed there testifies') were also included. We know that the abbey had been interested in these waters as early as the twelfth century. There was a dispute between Abbot Faritius and the miller of Sutton Courtenay. It was alleged that the latter secretly crossed the river by night to take turves to repair the king's mill and fishery in Sutton.

Two further documents show that Blacknall did not intend to run the mills or exploit the fisheries at Abingdon himself. In 1562 he made an agreement with Richard Teysdale or Tesdale⁴⁶ of Abingdon, a sadler, whereby he leased to him for twenty-one years the abbey mills, with all the waters thereto belonging, and the ford called Nyettes ford, with the fishery of the Thames from Nuneham lock to New Bridge. Included in this bargain was a lease of Cosyner's House, which was situated on Brewerne Hayce, the island to the south of the mills. Teysdale or Tesdale was to pay Blacknall a rent of £44.⁴⁷ Two years later Blacknall granted a lease of twenty years of one half of the fulling mills in Abingdon to David Parrys of Abingdon, fuller.⁴⁸ The agreement included the

⁴⁰ Ibid., no. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., no. 7.

⁴² Ibid., no. 11.

⁴³ Ibid., no. 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., no. 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid., no. 20.

⁴⁶ For the Tesdale family in the sixteenth century, see Manfred Brod, 'Religious conflict in seventeenth century Abingdon', in J. Bishop, ed., *Aspects of Abingdon's Past* (Abingdon, 2004), pp. 3–15.

⁴⁷ Verney deeds, no. 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid., no. 36.

use of half of four racks (for stretching cloth),⁴⁹ which had been constructed in the close, as well as ‘the new built dwelling house lying near the said close’. The rent was £8 10s. annually and also ‘4 dozen of good sweet pigeons’. Parrys was not allowed to sublet, save with Blacknall’s consent.

We now come to the nub of the matter. Thacker pointed out the irreconcilable interests of those whose livelihood depended on the river Thames:

The riparian owners and the tenants of their mills and fisheries who saw in the maintenance and increase of the weirs an easy and lucrative source of income ... the barge masters who desired clear navigation and good floating depths ... and lastly, the dim riverside populations, who perpetually and sullenly complained of many things, but chiefly of the floods caused by the continual heightening of the weirs.⁵⁰

The lawsuit of 1570 shows telling instances of these concerns. George Stonehouse, the lord of the manor of Radley, and Elizabeth, his wife, sued William Blacknall and Richard Tesdale in the Court of Requests for damage done to their interests and those of their tenants at Radley. From the interrogations framed by the counsel for Stonehouse, it seems that the principal bone of contention was the alleged raising of the height of Abingdon lock, which led to the flooding of the Thames islets or eyots and lands upstream. It was stated in the questions put to witnesses that the area round Nyettford had been in past time firm ground, but ‘by reason or means of the hyere penninge of the locke called Abyndon locke and enhauncinge of the bank adjoininge thereunto’ it was in danger of being drowned by water. Different witnesses estimated that the lock had been raised by one, one and a half, or two feet, and that the watercourse had been enlarged in breadth by an estimated six or seven score yards. The problem was an old one. One witness could remember a time when Nyettford ‘might have bytn stopped with a botteful of hey’. A decision had been taken thirty-five years previously in the last abbot’s time to stop up the Nyettford, and Sir John Wellesborne had been appointed to deliver timber, but never carried out the job.

The reason why the water level was raised by the lock was to provide a sufficient head of water to drive the fulling mills at Abingdon. These had been rebuilt by William Blacknall, and clearly he wished to promote a source of power to drive his investment. Although it was called a lock, it was what we would call a weir. The drawings of the locks on both the Monks’ map and the Claydon map show that the lock consisted of a barrier set across the stream and filled with movable tackle. Thacker describes the tackle, including paddles and rymers, fitting into a sill or beam under water at the bottom of the river and towards the top on to the weir bridge.⁵¹ These could be moved up and down according to the required depth, or they could be taken away altogether when a flash or rush of water was required to take a boat up or down. William Blacknall, when questioned, did not deny that he had rebuilt the fulling mills, but he strenuously maintained that the lock had not been raised. ‘If the said locke or ffullinge mill do stand nereby the space of a 1000 years they will not impaire or hurt the said ground called Nyot.’⁵² The weight of evidence seems to have been against him. John Owen, an 80-year-old man, put it in these words:

He knoweth that there was longe agone a fullinge myll ajoyninge to the towne mylles in Abingdon and that the same fullinge myle was pulled down ... because thare must be so mucche water penned to make hym goo that it would drowne all the nyett ... and this deponent thynkethe that to make the sayd fullynge mylles goo the water of Thames moste be penned so bigge that it will in shorte space surround and overflowe the grounds called nyett more than heretofore it hath accustomed to do.⁵³

⁴⁹ A map containing a survey of tenter frames at Exeter is published in R. A. Skelton and P. D. A. Harvey, *Local Maps and Plans from Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 164–8.

⁵⁰ Thacker, *The Thames Highway*, 1, p. 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7. John Blair has a nineteenth-century illustration of one in his *Waterways and Canal Building*, p. 10.

⁵² William Blacknall’s deposition, TNA PRO Reg. 2 74/73.

⁵³ John Owen’s deposition, TNA PRO Reg. 2 89/51.

It was not the first time that Blacknall and Tesdale had been in trouble with their neighbours over this question. One of the enquiries made in the interrogatory addressed to them asked whether they had fulfilled the order made against them in the court twelve months before, in which they had been told to reduce the height of the lock. Blacknall claimed he had carried out the orders of the court, but he said that if the lock was lowered by two feet, then the mill would not work.

The lamentable effects of the 'hygher penning' of Abingdon lock were obvious to the tenants of Radley, who lined up behind Stonehouse to give evidence about how their interests had been injured. The increased water level arising out of the raising of the lock flooded the Thames eyots and meadows on either side of the river. This reduced their rights of common pasture. They claimed that they had always been accustomed to drive their cattle through Nyettford, which 'for their easiamt in the somer season used to stand in the said water'. They also used to wash their sheep in Nyettford and on Sheepwashe eyot, presumably no longer accessible now that the water levels were raised. A further right was allegedly damaged. They claimed to have been allowed to lop the willows and other trees growing on the eyot as part of their rights of common. John Owen recalled that 'he did knowe Henry Wyre, Thomas Wytte and John Symon and his sonnes (and others) tenants of the said manor of Radley, to loppe the willowes and other trees growyng in and upon the said eyote and quietlye to carrye away the same.'⁵⁴

It seems that an attempt had been made by the men of Radley to stop up both ends of the channel to the north of Nyett during the year before the lawsuit. One of the questions lists a group of Radley men, including Edward Carter and John Harper, who attempted to stop up both ends of Nyettford with trowels, spades, and mattocks, but apparently managed to do the job while behaving themselves 'peaceably and quietlye duryng the said Michaelmas eve and duryng all the tyme of their saide beyng at Nyettford aforesaid [and] they did not intend meane or purpose to do ... violence to any person.'⁵⁵ Blacknall evidently regarded the eyots in this stretch of the Thames as part of his lease. He had been arraigned for drying hay upon the 'ladyes ground called Nyett' in October 1553. Tesdale also had been involved in an action of trespass done in Nyettford or in some of the Thames eyots.⁵⁶

A third main area of dispute was over fishing rights. Here the abbey had enjoyed privileges since the early Middle Ages. This is reflected in the Monks' map. According to Thomas Rawlye, former servant of the abbot of Abingdon, the waters from Abingdon mills to Nuneham lock used to belong to the monastery. This coincides almost exactly with the length of the river shown by the Monks' map. 'The abbot kept the said water in his owne hand for the provision of his said house.' He went on to state categorically that the men of Radley had no right to fish there. He even added that 'he hath heard that one of the tenants of Radley whose name he have remembereth not did lye his weale'⁵⁷ in the said water of Nyettforde and that faulte was found there in that yf yt had not ben for the suite and means of Mr Andlet the saide tenante had forfeyte his copyholde for his said trespass.'⁵⁸ The Radley tenants, however, tried to maintain that the fishing rights at Nyettford were part of their common rights. They also cited an occasion which happened before the dissolution of the monastery. Roger Taille of Abingdon recalled that they used to 'lay their weels and other engines in the said Nyettford to take fyssh there as thaire common ffysshnyge without interruption'. He remembered that one Henry Walton, then fisherman to the abbot

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Question 19, TNA PRO Reg. 2 89/51.

⁵⁶ Questions 11 and 17, TNA PRO Reg. 2 89/51.

⁵⁷ A weel is a wicker trap mainly used for catching eels. They were in use locally in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. Kirk, *Accounts of the Obedientiars*, includes several references; 1412–13, 'In wyles emptis xiid' (p. 76); 1450–1, 'In weles emptis pro piscibus capiendis in fossato conventus iiiiis xd' (p. 130).

⁵⁸ *Inspeximus* of 1571, Verney deeds, no. 47.

... did take up and rayse out of Nyettford weels there layed by Thomas Porter, Thomas Wytt and oulde Guldeforde and the said Walton declared to John Andelett esquer, then being steward of the Abbott what he had donne, 'well,' sayed the same Andelett, 'we will for that tyme borowe there ffyssh but loke nowe carye backe the weeles where them hadest them or I will set the by the heeles because the water belongyth not to us but to the tenants of Radley.'⁵⁹

Moreover, Roger claimed that while Sir John Wellesborne 'had the flysshange in Abingdon ... he did not intermeddle to ffyshe in Nyettford or Thope water.'

Blacknall, judging from the way he annotated his maps, which were almost certainly produced to support his case, claimed all the fishing rights on the Thames from Abingdon mills to Nuneham lock. This included the millstream, lying between Abingdon lock and the mills, Thrupp water, which lay north and east of Nyett and Goosey, and the main Thames channel, which lay south of Nyett (see Fig. 5). The terms of the 1559 grant seem very specific, and evidence like that of Thomas Kyppingale, who said he could remember seeing the men of Radley fishing there, seem pretty thin. Field's deposition is more credible. He was 'somytyme servant unto the late abbot of the said monasterye' and was responsible for providing the abbey with fish. He had also taken the 'grounde byrdes' [the swans] breeding in the eyot for the use of the abbey. He had never heard of anyone fishing in the said waters, apart from the abbot and his fishermen, 'except the same were by stelth'. He clinched his argument by recalling that at the time of the Dissolution the king's officers, including Mr Riche, had invited all men to make complaint who claimed that they had received any wrong or sustained any damage from the abbot or his officers. Apparently none of the tenants of Radley had turned up to lay their grievances about the fishery. Field concluded that they had none.⁶⁰

An important issue which is relevant to the origin of the Monks' map and had a bearing on the fishing dispute and the rights of common was the status of the parish of Radley.⁶¹ There had been a church in Radley since 1284, but it was considered to be a dependent chapel of St Helen's Church, Abingdon. Its status at the Dissolution was undefined; one of the questions which interested both the parties in the 1570 lawsuit was whether Radley was a parish 'of itselfe' or whether it was a chapel of St Helen's. It appears from the evidence given by Thomas Rawlye and John Peace that a survey had been made 'upon the suppression of the said house' by a Mr Amyas 'that yt might appere whether the said water called Nyet Fford was parcel of Radley or not at whiche tyme the said fford was not founde parcel of the manner of Radley but belonginge to the said monasterye.' The annotation on the Monks' map of 'Nyate within the thythyng of thrupe lyinge in the paryshe of sayn(t) Eleyne in Abingdon and beinge in Mr Lyons lordship' seems a direct reference to this. It seems likely that the original draft of the map was the direct result of Amyas's survey. The witnesses in the 1570 lawsuit dutifully lined up behind Blacknall or Stonehouse and gave conflicting evidence. Roger Taille, for instance, mentioned that Radley was a parish 'of itself and had always had the right to christen, marry and bury [the usual marks of parochial status]'. He further testified that Thrupp hamlet, Nyetford, and the eyots all lay within Radley parish.⁶² Stonehouse, not surprisingly, was supported in this matter by the Radley tenants. John Peace of Abingdon, on the other hand, produced a circumstantial story which supported the other side. He claimed that

the sd fford lyes in St Helens p[ari]sshe and that Radley is a chappell – and so he saieth of Drayton, Shippon and Sandford and knoweth the same to be true for that yerelye at Whitsontyde they used to come to Abingdon with a procession acknowledging the same

⁵⁹ Roger Taille's deposition, TNA PRO Reg. 2 89/51.

⁶⁰ Thomas Field's deposition, Verney deeds, no. 47.

⁶¹ *VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 416.

⁶² Verney deeds, no. 47.



Fig. 5. The main channel of the river Thames south of Radley. (*Photograph by author.*)

to be they head church and pay a portion of vs by the yere unto the vicare of St Helenes aforesaid and knoweth further that for the first fruytes of one Hartley beinge vicar of St Helenes of Abingdon beinge behynde and uppayed the churches of St Helenes and of Radley and Drayton was commanded to be shut and sealed by the bysshopes officers and had so bene yf they had not agreed for the payment thereof.⁶³

Down to the nineteenth century Radley was still called a chapel of St Helen's.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

So what happened to William Blacknall? He pursued a successful career and became a highly respected member of the local community. In 1569 he was described as 'of Abingdon'. He had already served as one of the bailiffs of the town in 1550, and in 1565–6 he was mayor. He divided his time between Swallowfield and Abingdon, tending to frequent Abingdon more and more. In 1571 he gave up all his interests in Swallowfield to his son, another William, and from then onwards he is styled 'gentleman' instead of 'yeoman'. In 1578 he was living at a house in the abbey called The Garner, and he died in 1585. Within two generations his family had progressed from being millers to being gentry.

I have argued in this paper that the two maps in the Verney records date from the mid-sixteenth century. They are likely to have been made, or at least were cited to support, William Blacknall's interests in litigation between him and George Stonehouse. Judging from the information displayed on them, they were brought into court to pinpoint the possession of lands and rights; they also located water features (such as eyots, mills, locks, and fishing places). They are valuable to the economic and social historian in that they illustrate the grounds for conflict between those living on the banks of the Thames, conflicts arising out of milling, fulling, fishing, and farming.

⁶³ John Peace's deposition, Verney deeds, no. 47.

⁶⁴ *VCH Berks.*, 4, p. 416.

They also make a notable contribution to our understanding of the evolution of the Thames landscape.

Finally, why was the 'Monks' map' so called? It appears that William Blacknall based a number of his 'rights' on the fact that he inherited or succeeded to rights which were formerly held by the abbot and monks of Abingdon Abbey. It was recognized that the map enshrined rights and possessions originally owned by the abbey, and accordingly it acquired the popular name connecting it with the dissolved institution.

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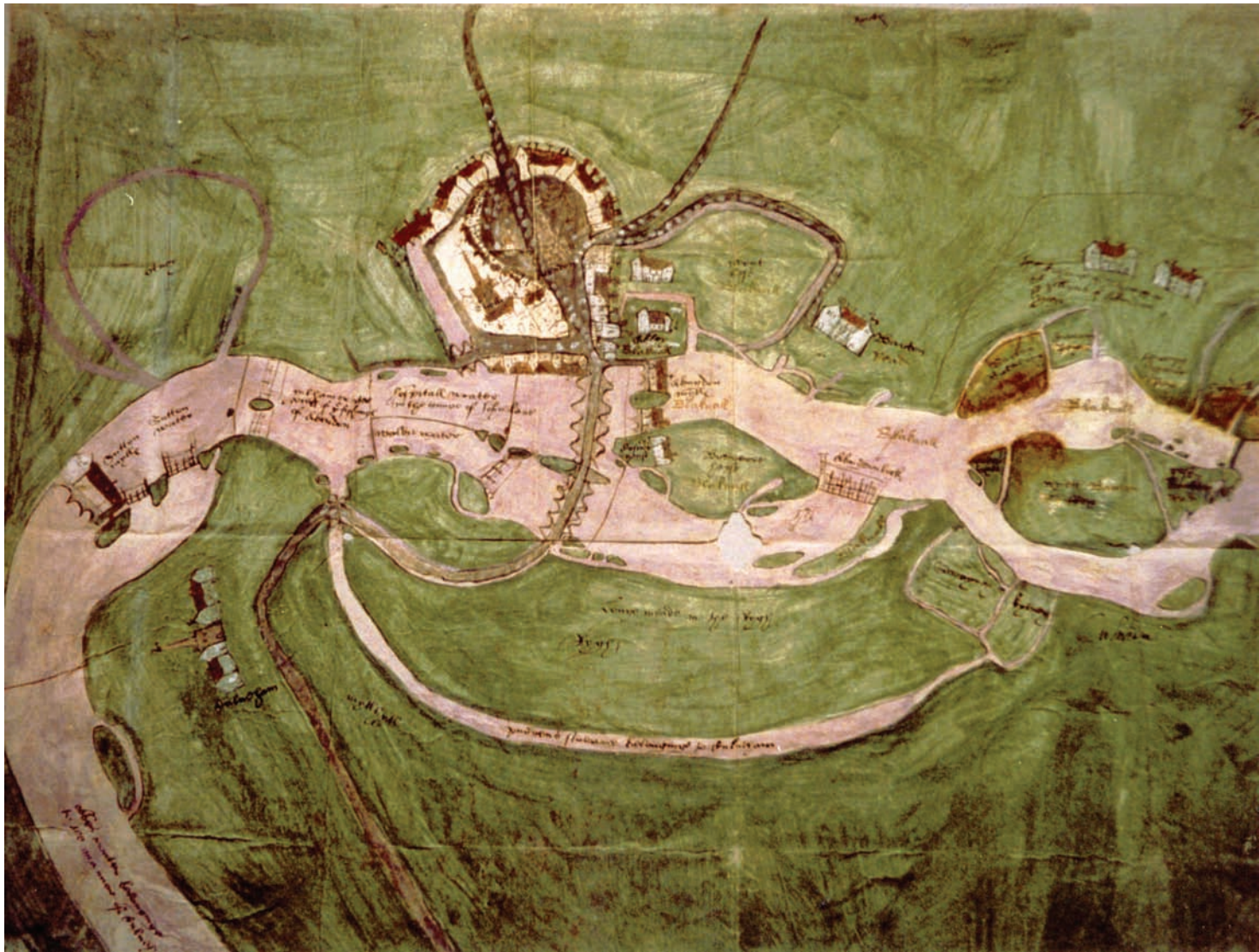


Plate 7. The Blackwell or Clarendon Map. (Photograph by author. By permission of the Verney Estate.) [Steane, p. 24.]
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A

B



B

C

The Monks' Map. (By kind permission of the Curator of Abingdon Museum.)

The map is in one long strip, but has been divided into overlapping sections for the purpose of this illustration.

Above: A to B, the course of the river Thames from Abingdon eastward to Barton. Below: B to C, from Barton eastward to Radley.

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