

## ABINGDON: A LOST BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HAMLET

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Abingdon Meadow in Cold Brayfield, to the north of Turvey Bridge, has essentially the same name now that it had at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it was called Abington Meadow both in a volume of maps of the estate of Farrer Grove Spurgeon (1799–1800)<sup>1</sup> and in the enclosure award for Lavendon cum Cold Brayfield (1802).<sup>2</sup> It occurs as Abington Mead in a deed of 1638 and as Abbington Meadowe in another of 1653.<sup>3</sup> The name Abington or Abingdon occurs elsewhere in Cold Brayfield. On the northern edge of the parish, the field adjoining Snip Wood was called Abington Field in 1799–1800, and the enclosure award designates a large part of the land to the north of the Lavendon road as belonging to Great Abington Field, Little Abington Field and Lower Abington Field. Strips of land in Abington Field occur in sources of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries<sup>4</sup> and, even earlier, in medieval sources. In 1323 the demesne of Snelson manor was partly “in the field of Snelleston” and partly “in the fields of Lauenden, Braunfeld, Abingdon and Harewold”.<sup>5</sup> In the mid thirteenth century the records of Harrold Priory contain details concerning several small grants of land to the priory and to Cold Brayfield Church in the fields or field of Habinton.<sup>6</sup> By one of the earliest, John de Louente gave to Cold Brayfield Church half an acre of land “in Habinton field, namely in Langlond” and a rood of meadow “in Habiton meadow”.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of the fields of Snelson and Abingdon in 1323 alongside those of Lavendon, Cold Brayfield and Harrold suggests that the two former places were considered to be separate settlements, and there is good supporting evidence that this was so. Snelson was described as “the vill of Snelson” in a charter of the later thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In 1227 Abingdon was represented as a separate vill alongside Lavendon, Cold Brayfield and Weston Underwood for the purpose of empanelling a jury before the king’s justices.<sup>9</sup> The existence of a separate settlement at Abingdon is also indicated by evidence from personal names. Among the thirteenth-century records of Harrold Priory there are mentions of Simon of Habiton, Robert son of Simon of Habiton, William of Habinthon, William son of William of Habinton, William son of Stephen of Habinton, Isobel widow of William Shoemaker (or William the shoemaker) of Habinton, Cecily widow of Geoffrey of Habinton and Master Robert of Habinthon.<sup>10</sup> The subsidy roll of 1332 records payments of tax in Lavendon by Sir William de Abyngton, chaplain, William son of Ralph de Abyngton and Simon de Abyngton.<sup>11</sup>

Abingdon was also a manor, and as such has been discussed by several students of feudal society and genealogy, most notably by William Farrer. He observed that the Visdelou fee in Cold Brayfield was described in 1167 as “Abintona Visdelu”.<sup>12</sup> This is the earliest occurrence of the name of the manor. On the grounds that this fee may be identified with two hides which Matilda Visdelou held in dower in 1185, Farrer

suggests that it was the same as the two hides which the bishop of Coutances had held "in Lauuendene" in 1086. There were then on the manor four villeins, three bordars and three slaves.<sup>13</sup> Possibly this manor represents the unstated quantity of land at Cold Brayfield which King Edgar was reputed to have granted to Beorhtnoth his *comes* in 967. The text of the charter attesting this grant is preserved in the chronicle of Abingdon Abbey.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that the abbey may have claimed rights in the land at some stage during the following hundred years, and that it may consequently have given its name to the manor and hamlet there. However, if such rights existed they had been lost by 1066, and there is no trace of them in Domesday Book.

The site of Abingdon manor has been a matter for discussion. Fowler suggested "the modern Uphoe in Lavendon",<sup>15</sup> but in 1274–5 Fulk de Rycote, the lord of the manor, had a private fishery "below his garden of Abintone", which suggests a location by the river.<sup>16</sup> So again does the fact that in 1278–9, and usually thereafter, the manor was called Waterhall, and that in 1324 it was described more specifically as "le Waterhalle iuxta Torueye".<sup>17</sup> The name Waterhall long remained attached to four ancient enclosures next to the river in the north-eastern corner of the parish of Cold Brayfield: Little Water Halls, Great Water Halls, Middle Water Halls and Far Water Halls; they are marked on the estate maps of 1799–1800. Farrer must therefore have been correct in his view that Abingdon manor stood "near the Ouse over against Turvey".<sup>18</sup> Its position, closely analogous to that of Snelson, was opposite a cluster of tiny islands in a bend of the river (grid reference SP 934530). This identification is supported by archaeological evidence. Aerial photographs taken in 1946 by the Royal Air Force suggest that there was a house on this site, directly opposite the boathouse recorded on the larger-scale Ordnance Survey maps. More recently, medieval shards, together with a Purbeck marble mortar, have been unearthed from ploughsoil there. The hamlet of Abingdon, to judge from the same aerial photographs, stretched some way to the west of the manor house.<sup>19</sup> Some years ago my brother found medieval shards and building stone, associated with slight earthworks, in the field called Laytons (grid references SP 930532 and SP 928529).<sup>20</sup>

The independence of Abingdon as a vill in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was enhanced by the status of the manor at that time. Abingdon was the head manor of the honour of Visdelou, and as such attracted dependants. During the thirteenth century, by contrast, the manor diminished in size and importance. Humphrey Visdelou, lord of the manor from c. 1230, ran into debt and pledged lands in the manor to some Bedford Jews – a common plight among men of his class. The decline of the Visdelou fortunes was matched by the rise of the Norwich family, who reaped the benefits accruing to a successful career in the king's service. Henry III granted Humphrey Visdelou's mortgaged lands to Simon de Norwich for four years so that he could recover the price of a horse he had sold to Humphrey.<sup>21</sup> Simon de Norwich had land at Uphoe by 1234, and he had already begun to acquire land in Abingdon.<sup>22</sup> Later Henry de Norwich purchased two acres of arable and 26 acres of woodland from Humphrey Visdelou.<sup>23</sup> He levied a fine to establish his title to these woods in 1258 and was subsequently reported to have made a park at Waterhall.<sup>24</sup> Humphrey Visdelou sold demesne lands to others as well. Altogether, according to the Hundred Rolls, fifteen buyers bought lands amounting to 76 acres and two and a half virgates (about 150 acres in all), with 36 acres of wood and four acres of meadow.<sup>25</sup>

This represents an area larger than the fourteenth-century demesne — which will be examined shortly — and suggests that Humphrey sold over half his demesne lands. All the manor's woodlands were sold, for none remained in the fourteenth century.

Having been reduced in this way, Waterhall manor suffered some loss of independence as a result of its being sold in 1280 by Fulk de Rycote, Humphrey Visdelou's heir, to Reginald de Grey.<sup>26</sup> Reginald had already inherited the neighbouring manor of Snelson so that the manor house at Waterhall became redundant as household accommodation. In 1308 and 1324 the manor house was valued at two shillings, but in 1370 it was said that the house and buildings could bring in nothing beyond the costs of upkeep.<sup>27</sup> The demesne lands of Waterhall manor retained their identity, but for some purposes the manor was integrated with Snelson. In an extent of Snelson made in 1323 the manor house there was valued "with the herbage and fruit of the gardens together with the fruit of the garden at le Waterhalle".<sup>28</sup> Simon de Baldreston's accounts of 1323–4, made when the manor was in the king's hands after the death of John de Grey, contains a stock account for Snelson but none for Waterhall, which suggests that the demesne at the latter was managed from Snelson.<sup>29</sup> It has been observed above that Snelson demesne lands at this time included some arable in the fields of Abington.

From the fourteenth century there survive three surveys of Waterhall which permit an approximate description of the demesne lands attached to the manor. The surveys are all from inquisitions *post mortem*, and are not of the highest quality. They date from 1308 (following the death of Reginald de Grey), 1324 (following that of John de Grey) and from 1370 (following that of Reginald de Grey of Wilton).<sup>30</sup> Despite some variations, they agree roughly on the dimensions of the demesne, which was by any standards a very small one. The evidence may best be represented in tabular form:

	1308	1324	1370
	ac.	ac.	ac.
arable	100	140	120
meadow	10	12	18
pasture	22	6	?
	132	158	138+

The valuation of the arable in the three surveys — 50s. 0d. in 1308, 23s. 0d. in 1324, 26s. 8d. in 1370 — shows more variation than the stated acreages. This is because between 1308 and 1324 the valuation of arable land here was sharply reduced from 6d. to 2d. an acre. Twopence an acre is very low by fourteenth-century standards and implies that the demesne was not regarded as reliable wheat land. In 1370 the two-thirds of the arable under crops were valued at 4d. an acre and it was reported that the other third of the land, lying fallow and in common each year, was worth nothing. This implies an average valuation of the arable at  $2\frac{2}{3}$ d. an acre, an improvement on the level of 1324, but hardly a significant one. The Waterhall demesne was ripe for being abandoned as arable land during the agricultural contraction of the late Middle Ages.

The history of rents at Abingdon over this period is too incoherent to yield any certain sense. In 1308 it was reported that there were 26s. 0d. of assized rent due every year, half at Michaelmas and half at the feast of Annunciation. In 1324, however, a sum of 53s. 4d. was due from free tenants at four terms — Christmas, the Annunciation,

the Nativity of St. John the Baptist and Michaelmas. Perhaps the jurors of 1308 spoke only half the truth. In 1370 there were said to be 33s. 4d. of rent "in the hands of free tenants", due half at Michaelmas and half at Easter. With such small income from rent it is likely that the manor had only a few tenancies. The area of land in tenants' hands is nowhere stated. Evidently by 1324, and probably by 1308, the manor had no surviving bond tenancies. The declining number of references to Abingdon as a vill after the thirteenth century, together with the gradual disappearance of Abingdon as a family name, suggest that Abingdon had already decayed as a settlement and that the fourteenth-century free tenants lived elsewhere.

As a rule it is difficult, for want of adequate documentary material, to explain the desertion of deserted medieval villages. In Abingdon's case the evidence is coherent enough to suggest the main lines of development. The settlement was never more than a hamlet in the parish of Cold Brayfield. Its separate existence is best attested in the days when the associated manor was important in the domestic economy of the Visdelou family. By contrast, the diminishing prominence of Abingdon from the later thirteenth century onwards is associated with the decline of the Visdelou family and the break-up of the manor. It is reasonable to suppose that there were strong causal links here. It was common enough for a medieval manor separated from any nucleated village to constitute the focal point for a secondary settlement of tenants, servants and farmworkers dependent on the manor. The economic fortunes of such a settlement were bound to be determined by the vagaries of feudal history. Abingdon's story is not that of a typical medieval deserted village, but, for all that, it cannot have been an uncommon one. The abandonment of the settlement at Abingdon was perhaps hastened by declining agricultural expectations there. It is difficult to explain the feeble quality of the demesne lands in the fourteenth century in any other way, unless these exceptionally low valuations were the fictions of exceptionally corrupt local juries.<sup>31</sup>

# NOTES

1. Farrer MSS., "Plans of the Separate Estates belonging to Farrer Grove Spurgeon, Esqr. situate in the Counties of Bedford and Buckingham, Survey'd in the Years 1799 & 1800, Richard Gee, Turvey, Beds." I am grateful to Mr. Michael Farrer for permission to make use of his family papers. When I consulted them in 1963 they were stored in iron trunks, some with Messrs. Garrard and Allen, solicitors, of Olney and some in the Cowper Museum at Olney, but Mr. Farrer kept the maps at Brayfield House.
2. Buckinghamshire County Records Office.
3. Farrer MSS., Feoffment from the Earl of Peterborough to William Bodington, senior, and John Cockman of the manors and farms of Waterhall, Old Layton and Brayfield, 1638; Feoffment from John Bodington and others to Edward Bodington, his son, of the manor or farm house with appurtenances in the possession of William Clifton, 1653.
4. Lavendon Parish Records, Terrier of lands belonging to the vicarage of Lavendon, 1671/85. Farrer MSS., Release from William Clifton to Thomas Farrer, 1663; Lease and Release from William Hamilton and his wife to William Watson, 1733.
5. Public Record Office (hereafter P.R.O.), E. 142/78(1).
6. *Records of Harrold Priory*, ed. G. H. Fowler (Beds. Hist. Rec. Soc., XVII, 1935), nos. 71-9, pp. 59-61.
7. *Ibid.*, no. 58, p. 48.
8. *Ibid.*, no. 24, p. 31.
9. *Calendar of the Roll of the Justices on Eyre, 1227*, ed. J. G. Jenkins (Bucks. Archaeol. Rec. Soc. Rec. Ser., VI, 1945), no. 641, p. 58.
10. *Records of Harrold Priory*, nos. 58, 62, 63, 74-7, 79, pp. 48-50, 60-1.
11. P.R.O., E. 179/242/4, m.17.
12. W. Farrer, *Honors and Knights' Fees*, 3 vols., London and Manchester, 1923-5, I, p. 56.
13. *Domesday Book*, I, fo. 145v.
14. *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon (A.D. 201-1189)*, ed. J. Stevenson (Rolls Ser., 2 vols., 1858), I, pp. 300-1; P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (Royal Hist. Soc., 1968), no. 750, p. 241.
15. *Records of Harrold Priory*, p. 197.
16. *Rotuli Hundredorum*, I, p. 39b.
17. *Ibid.*, II, p. 349; P.R.O., C. 134/82(a). For the identity of Abingdon and Waterhall manors see Farrer, *op. cit.*, I, p. 56.
18. Farrer, *op. cit.*, I, p. 56.
19. For this information I am indebted to Mr. M. Farley.
20. 'Archaeological Notes from the Buckinghamshire County Museum', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, XVIII, 1969, p. 332.
21. Farrer, *op. cit.*, I, p. 58.
22. *Cal. Charter Rolls*, I, p. 189.
23. *Rotuli Hundredorum*, I, p. 37b.
24. *A Calendar of the Feet of Fines for the County of Buckingham, 7 Richard I to 44 Henry III*, ed. M. W. Hughes (Bucks. Archaeol. Rec. Soc. Rec. Ser., IV, 1942), p. 108; *Rotuli Hundredorum*, II, p. 350b.
25. *Rotuli Hundredorum*, I, p. 37b.
26. Farrer, *op. cit.*, I, p. 59.
27. P.R.O., C. 134/3(5); C. 134/82(9); E. 149/31(12).
28. P.R.O., E. 142/78(1).
29. P.R.O., S.C.6/1119/2.
30. Sources cited in note 27.
31. Some of the conclusions of this paper were summarized in R. H. Britnell, 'The History of Cold Brayfield', *The Bucks Standard*, 28 February, 6 March, 20 March, 1964.