

Financial Management at the Abbey

The main purpose of a monastery was prayer, and over the years pious people gave Abingdon Abbey monetary gifts and landed estates to facilitate its function. In exchange, the donors would expect supplications for the good of their souls, and those of their families, to be added to the abbey's schedule. By the Dissolution, the abbey was a major landowner in Berkshire and elsewhere, among the half-dozen wealthiest monasteries in the country.

Property on this scale needs administration, and the fact that Abingdon hadn't lost its wealth, as some other monasteries did, indicates that it was not badly managed. But the Middle Ages weren't well advanced in management theory, and the monasteries understandably weren't at the cutting edge. They never accepted the idea of an institution as a financial entity. Medieval kings knew they would often need soldiers, so they gave their barons landed estates from which agreed numbers of soldiers could be drawn. In the same way, the abbey, having numerous specific needs, distributed these among the more able of the monks, attributed to each one some specific sources of income from the abbey's properties from which the need could be met, and left him to get on with it.

These men were the obedientiars, and the departments they ran were known as the obediences. There were up to a dozen of them, varying a little over time. The principle seems simple and logical: the Kitchener provides the food for the monastery, the Chamberlain the clothing; the Gardener tends the gardens. But the complication comes in on the supply side. Among the sources of income assigned to the Kitchener were many of the abbey's rents, dues and fees from the town of Abingdon; these had to be collected, and there were duties connected with them. Rented properties had to be maintained; markets had to be organised and policed; courts had to function. The Kitchener was no doubt a busy man and probably rather unpopular in the town, but the actual provision of food will not have been the greatest of his concerns. The Trinity Chapel Warden also held property in Abingdon, but much of it was rented, some from outside landlords and some from other obedientiars. At the same time, he was receiving rent from the Almoner for arable land in Marcham. When a tenement he held in Stert Street in Abingdon needed rebuilding, it was he, and not the Abbey's Keeper of Works, who bought the materials and hired and paid the builders. When the Kitchener called on the Gardener's workmen to attend his court, the Gardener had to pay a fine for them to be exempted. The obedientiar system certainly worked, but one feels that a different form of organisation might have been more efficient.

The obedientiars kept careful accounts of moneys they received and spent, and these were audited every year at midsummer, presumably before the abbot and in the presence of representatives of the other monks. A few such accounts have survived. There must have been many transactions in kind which did not involve money, and it is not clear how these were checked. What the accounts do show is the extent to which the different obediences maintained their independence. Balances carry through from year to year, and are not redistributed from accounts in surplus to those in deficit. Obedientiars who left their positions might have personal debts to pay off, which is obviously inconsistent with the principle that monks could have no private property. If there were any attempts at centralisation, they failed. There was a

Common Chest, but this was only a way of paying bills that none of the other obedientiars would accept. There were also two Treasurers. They levied significant sums of money each year from the obedientiars, but most of what they collected was intended as a fund for future building projects.

The major barrier to effective financial management of a monastery was often the abbot himself. To the outside world, he was a landed magnate like any other, and, in the case of an important house like Abingdon Abbey, wealthier than most. He was expected to play a role on the political stage, attend the House of Lords when a parliament was called, entertain extensively, and appear dressed, mounted, and attended in a manner suitable to his status. The Abbot of Abingdon had his own establishment and his own officers, mostly lay, and held what was probably the greater part of the abbey's sources of income to pay for them. He also seems to have used the abbey's estate at Welford, south of the Berkshire Downs, as a holiday retreat and it was the Chamberlain who had to meet the costs. The divergence of interest between abbot and monastery sometimes led to disaster, and almost did so in Abingdon in the fourteenth century when the abbot had run up a debt to the Treasurers of over £1400, an astronomical sum for the period that had eventually to be written off. In later times, the Treasurers at least sometimes included the abbot himself, which may have been a deterrent to excessive profligacy. But in the last analysis, the monks had little or no protection against an abbot determined to spend beyond the monastery's means.

The abbey's administrators would no doubt have explained their activities as ensuring that its prayers for the nation and for the donors' souls would continue through the centuries. But by the later middle ages prayer was a business, and those who offered it expected suitable recompense, especially in view of the special discipline, including celibacy, to which they were subject. The Kitchener's accounts show that abbey food must have been good, with ample meat, fish, and poultry, and there were occasional cash gifts to each individual monk for spices to relieve the blandness of the fare on fast days. The Chamberlain employed tailors, a shoemaker, a valet, and a launderer to look after the monks' clothing, and it was also his duty to hand out pocket-money on special occasions. In the 1420s, a monk got £1 16s 8d in a year if he was a qualified priest, and otherwise £1 7s, which can be compared to the 10s plus board and some clothing received by the Gardener's servant. The religious personnel of the monastery at that time was thirty-five monks with three priors and the abbot. There was also an unknown number of *socii*, probably lay brothers, whose functions are nowhere explained. It does seem that there was a shortage of administrative talent, and a larger group of monks from whom obedientiars could be selected would have been helpful. The Keeper of the Common Chest had a scout travelling around and looking for new recruits, but he seems to have had no difficulty in finding promising youths to take the tonsure and receive a suitable education. It seems unlikely that the numbers were limited by lack of vocations, and more credible that monks already in residence were keeping the barriers high so as to protect their enviable standard of living.

By the sixteenth century, if not earlier, the abbey was plainly allowing itself to be milked, although whether this was by incompetence or corruption is now unknowable. In 1516, William Thomas, a master plumber from Oxford, arranged a contract by which he would do the plumbing work at the monastery so long as he lived. He and his men would have board and lodging when on site, he had use of a horse, and a new

gown of stated quality every Christmas. He would get 53s 4d per year, which was presumably a retainer, since the amount and quality of work are not specified. Thus, he couldn't be got rid of, even if his work was unsatisfactory or overpriced. After the Dissolution, the authorities had to recognise the contract, and Thomas continued to draw his money even when there was no longer any plumbing to be done.

Many aspects of the abbey's functioning remain uncertain. One is the work of its lay steward, who will have supervised its tenants and collected their rents. This was a responsible post, and its holder will have expected to be well remunerated. But by the 1530s, there was a difficult series of lawsuits between the steward of the time, John Audlett, and the abbot with the sums in dispute exceeding the annual value of the monastery as later calculated by the king's commissioners. It was only with the help of Thomas Cromwell that a settlement could be reached, and the price was the abbot's easy acquiescence in the Dissolution. Thus, the inadequacy of the monastery's financial controls played a part in the final catastrophe. But that, by then, had become inevitable irrespective of managerial expertise.

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Some individual points from the obendientiars' accounts.

The Gardener took fish from the Convent Ditch, using weels (fish baskets). He had a 'trunk' for keeping them in, which may mean he kept them alive until wanted. Some of the fish were sold to outside buyers along with other garden produce.

He also sold 'old beer' but didn't get much for it 'on account of the default of the buyers' - which probably means it was so bad they refused to pay.

There were fulling mills by 1416 which were having to be repaired by the Chamberlain (which I don't think James Bond noticed).

In 1420-1 Abbot John Dorset had to go personally to collect his dues at Drayton Wick, and take what must have been a large escort of 'Oxford scholars and divers men of the town'. The cost was £3 6s 8d, paid from the Common Chest.

In 1441, a physician, Master Richard Lostes, was on an annual retainer of £1 6s 8d, paid by the Treasurers. The 'instructor of the scholars' got £2. There were three barbers, getting 10s per year each.

The amounts of wax used were significant. Trinity Chapel alone used 270 lbs in the year 1436-7. 200 lbs of wax brought from London cost £4 8s delivered. Making it into tapers for the chapel cost 3s 4d plus 8d for the fuel. The man who lit the tapers got 3s 4d. Ready-made tapers were 5s per 100. By 1448-9, wax price had risen by a third.

To have a special daily mass said for your soul would cost 1s 2d per week in 1414-5, rising to 1s 8d by 1436-7. [A best-guess estimate would be that you would be depriving your heirs of £20,000 of annual income in modern values. See <http://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ppoweruk/index.php>]

A tiler and his mate in 1414-5 got 5d per day between them without board. A 'servant in the tailor's office' got 3d per week in 1417-8 and 3½d in 1428-9. About this time, the annual wages of a tailor or laundryman were 12s, and of a shoemaker 13s 4d. A groom got 6s 8d. But the tailor got extra for what he actually made, presumably to cover the cost of materials. It seems the standard rate for board was 1d per day, but the obedienciars didn't usually have to account for this.

Buying and selling horses seems to have involved a sort of agency fee, at 8d per transaction.

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