

A History of Ock Street to 1835 ¹

Manfred Brod

Part 1: A narrative history

Can there be landmarks in the history of a street? If there can, then the two which are most prominent for Ock Street are undoubtedly the survey carried out by Roger Amyce in 1554, and the several maps, schedules and valuations of the 1830s. The former was part of the preparations for the first incorporation of Abingdon by its charter of 1556, while the latter represents the changes of a great revolutionary decade which, among other things, consigned that charter to the history books. This work is concerned with Ock Street as it was before the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. It is in two parts; the first attempts to put together a narrative history mostly from published sources, while the second tries to illustrate long-term changes in streetscape and use from a study of Ock Street leases in the collection held in the town archives.

The history of Ock Street probably starts about the turn of the eleventh century, and it may have been a thoroughfare before it was an inhabited street. At this time, the growth of the abbey was leading to a second phase of development of the townscape, with a new set of roads converging on the market place and the abbey gates, and cutting across the older street plan centred on St Helen's church. According to a hypothetical scheme of Gabrielle Lambrick, there was a cross-roads where the part of the Bury that is now the High Street met Berewe (Boar, and now Bath) Street going north and a now vanished Anketill's Lane running south to the church.² Ock Street was the continuation of the Bury, going west. Marcham had become a property of Abingdon Abbey before 975 and the high road between that village and Abingdon must from then on, if not before, have been well trodden.³ Mienneke Cox retells the story of Abbot Faritius, arriving from Malmesbury in 1100, dismounting at the Ock Bridge

¹ I wish to acknowledge the help by way of references, transcripts, information and discussion given me by (in alphabetical order) Jessica Brod, Mienneke Cox, Janey Cumber, Jonathan Leach, Bridget Rudge, and Jackie Smith. I remain fully responsible for the use I have made of what they have taught me.

² Mienneke Cox, *The Story of Abingdon, Part 1* (Abingdon, 1986), 210. See also *ibid.* p. 205; M Biddle, HT Lambrick, and JNL Myres, 'The early history of Abingdon and its Abbey', *Medieval Archaeology* 12 (1968), 26-69. Agnes Baker considers that Anketill's Lane was a 14th century variant of St Edmund's Lane – *Historic Streets of Abingdon* (1957), 28.

³ SE Kelly (ed), *Charters of Abingdon Abbey, Part 2* (Oxford, 2001), 407-414. Dr Kelly considers the documents with the traditional date of 965 to be later forgeries.

and walking barefoot along Ock Street to his abbey.⁴ The substantial structure of the Ock Bridge, and its importance in documents of the time, have suggested to modern scholars that north-south traffic through Abingdon would also pass through Ock Street and cross the river at the Ock Bridge, rather than use St Helen's Bridge in the town centre and proceed by the no doubt more muddy route through Caldecott.⁵ This would have paralleled the situation in the twentieth century, when the busy A34 trunk road passed through Ock Street .

There were habitations in Ock Street by the twelfth or even the eleventh century, but they were probably few in number. Archaeological digs at the sites of the former Enock's Yard and Morland's Brewery appear to show substantial buildings associated with pits which seem to indicate industrial use as tanneries.⁶ Tanning is a smelly business, which would not be tolerated in a densely occupied area.. The first known written use of the street name, in its Latin version *vico de Ock*, dates to before 1250, and by that time the Carswell, the spring coming in from the north that provided its water supply, also had its name.⁷

Detailed information before the sixteenth century is scant. We know of a few moments of excitement. In 1248, Roger son of Edwin killed Peter le Cuthetere in Abingdon, but outwitted the hue and cry by racing for sanctuary in Marcham church. He agreed to abjure the realm, leaving his property, worth 13d, behind. The town of Abingdon was fined for having failed to capture him.⁸ In 1295, there were riots at a new market set up by the abbey in St Edmund's Mead, on the south side of the street. The town merchants saw this as unfair competition, violently closed it down, and forced the strangers to do their haggling on the far side of the Ock Bridge.⁹

By the fifteenth century, there are enough leases issued by the abbey to show that some parts of the street, at least, had long been settled. In 1463, Jacob Beke and a Richard whose surname is illegible were granted '*unum Gardinum cum duabus domibus debilibus*' – a garden with two dilapidated houses – on the north side of the street, for 21 years at an annual

⁴ Cox, *Abingdon Part 1*, 178.

⁵ Alan Rosevear, *Roads across the Upper Thames Valley*, Vol 7, 'Turnpike Roads through Abingdon', (no place, no date), 4.

⁶ *South Midlands Archaeology* 29 (1999) 73-74; 30 (2000) 79; 31 (2001) 65, 67; 32 (2002) 66-7. See also Mark R. Robert et al, 'Excavations at Mr Warrick's Arms Hotel and the Crown Public House, 83-88 Ock Street Abingdon' *Oxoniensia* LXII (1997) 163-178.

⁷ Margaret Gelling, *The Place-names of Berkshire, Part 2* (Cambridge, 1974), 435 Baker, *Historic Streets*, 14; Agnes Baker, *Historic Abingdon, Fifty-six articles* (Abingdon, 1963), 100-101; AE Preston, 'The Carswell (or Castlewell), Ock Street, Abingdon' *Berks Arch J.* 45 (1941), 37-44.

⁸ MT Clanchy, *Roll and Writ File of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248* (Selden Society Vol 90, 1973), 347.

⁹ Cox, *Abingdon Part 2*, 44.

rental of 5s. The frontage was just under four perches, and the neighbours on three sides were named in the lease. The new tenants were to put the houses into repair, and an annexed schedule shows the necessary works and costs, including ‘underpynnyng’ for which presumably no Latin term could be found, to a total £3 5s 4d. A mason stonelayer (*positor*) would be paid 6d per day, and his assistant 4d; there would be an assistant for every two tradesmen. The biggest single item would be 20s for carriage of stones to the site.¹⁰

Only with Roger Amyce’s survey do we have for the first time a full picture of the street. Amyce was a busy man in the years following the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries. The properties that fell to the crown, and were then dispersed to those well enough placed to take advantage, all needed to be surveyed and valued. He worked in numerous towns and villages in this and other regions, gaining useful friends in the process. When Christ’s Hospital was established in 1553, his name came second only to that of Sir John Mason on the list of governors, and his special status as a start-up manager was shown by the fact that, like Mason but unlike the other governors, he would not be replaced when he died.¹¹

The 1554 survey was part of the preparation for the grant of the royal charter to the town, which would take place two years later. Coming into Ock Street from Boar Street (the present Bath Street), Amyce started his list with the corner tenement and garden occupied by John Meadowe and owned by the wardens of St Helen’s Church. He noted that Meadowe paid 18s per year towards one obit in the church, but did not mention that obits had been illegal from 1548 until the accession of Mary in 1553. No doubt the church had had its money anyway. He then continued westward along the north side of the street, listing forty-four holdings in all, although many of these were of more than a single tenement while others were unbuilt. Crossing the road near the Ock Bridge, he returned eastward, noting another forty-four holdings. He seems to have taken Ock Street as including what is now the Square, and was followed in this by the Corporation and its chamberlains for the next several hundred years. Amyce’s survey shows Ock Street to be the biggest single street in Abingdon, with about 20% of the total of tenements.¹²

It was, of course, eighteen years since the abbey had been dissolved and six since the fraternities and chantries had followed them into oblivion. Christ’s Hospital had taken over

¹⁰ Reading, Berks Record Office (BRO), D/EBp T68/3. I have used a transcript made by Gabrielle Lambrick ca 1967, courtesy of Mieneke Cox.

¹¹ Calendar of Patent Rolls (CPR), 7 Edward VI Part 7, under 18 May 1553, p.142.

¹² I have used a translation by John McGovern of the copy then in Abingdon Museum, kindly lent me by Mieneke Cox, and have compared this with AE Preston’s version in the BRO under D/EP7/82, p.33ff.

many properties that had belonged to the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, and accounted for 22 of the 88 tenements noted by Amyce. Three holdings had been acquired by named outside investors, who will have been front men for the syndicates that had bought ex-ecclesiastical estates wholesale all over the country. Thomas Denton, gent, from Appleton, a lawyer well in with the authorities and the first recorder of Abingdon, had been enthusiastically purchasing freeholds all over the town, including twelve in Ock Street. He too seems to have been acting as an agent rather than on his own behalf.¹³ Numerous lesser folk had taken the precaution of obtaining letters patent to confirm their own freeholds and copyholds. Nonetheless, it was possible to identify twenty-seven ex-abbey properties and eight from the fraternity or chantries that could be transferred to the new Corporation in the charter; they appear in the final document of November 1556 in separate lists, in the order in which they come in Amyce, and in almost all cases giving the same name for the occupier as the one mentioned in the survey.¹⁴ It is important to notice that there were several levels of ownership; Amyce usually gives the holders of the head lease or freehold and the terms on which they held the property, followed by the name of the actual occupant. We are not told how much the sub-tenant paid to his immediate landlord, and do not know the balance of advantage between them.

A traveller entering Abingdon and Ock Street from the west in the sixteenth century might not be immediately aware that he had entered a town. There was, it seems, a kind of suburb, a small cluster of houses around the Ock Bridge and outside the town's boundaries, and a chapel in a meadow south of the road just inside.¹⁵ But there were few other houses. Most of the land going down to the Ock to the traveller's right would be pasture, with a number of closes used for market gardening or as orchards. These included a three-acre enclosure called, no doubt for good reason, the Thistlecroft. To his left was the expanse of Abingdon Field, later known as the Conduit Field, at least partly arable.¹⁶ Only after a third of a mile, with houses becoming more numerous, would the approach to the working centre of the town be marked by the Ruddle Cross with, beyond it, the horse, sheep and pig market at and around what is now the Square, and the produce market at the abbey gates.

¹³ CPR, 2&3 Philip & Mary Pt 4, under 1 Feb 1556/7 p. 92.

¹⁴ Bromley Challenor (ed), *Selections from the Borough Records* (Abingdon, 1899), 1-37.

¹⁵ Gabrielle Lambrick and CF Slade, *Two Cartularies of Abingdon Abbey* Vol 2 (Oxford Historical Society, NS 32,33, 1990), 143-50.

¹⁶ So noted by AE Preston in his version of Amyce's survey in the Berks Record Office. Abingdon Field is not to be confused with Abingdon Mead, which was outside the town on the far side of Ock Bridge. An alternative name for Abingdon Field was Cotsetelcroft – Baker, *Historic Streets*, 15.

The Ruddle Cross has been described as one of the unsolved mysteries of Abingdon's history. It was not mentioned by Amyce and so may have post-dated him, but was certainly in place by 1577 when it is mentioned in a lease.¹⁷ No pictures or descriptions of it are known, and its name is tantalising. Ruddle was a red ochre, used for marking sheep to indicate ownership. Was the cross coated with ruddle to give it a red colour, or was this the place that sheep destined for the market might not pass without being ruddled? When the cross disappeared is unknown, but it will probably not have survived the iconoclastic fanaticism of the puritans of the Civil War period, who also pulled down the much more famous Market Cross, Abingdon's main tourist attraction of the time. Nonetheless, Rocque's map of 1761 shows its old position by a definite broadening of the street on its north side, and this may still be visible in vestigial form today by a kink in property boundaries just outside No 59 Ock Street.

The lease that first mentions the Ruddle Cross was for a garden to its south, always held in conjunction with the Lamb Inn and possibly used for pasturing travellers' horses. It was roughly seven tenths of the way along Ock Street, but more than half the houses noted by Amyce on the south side were to the east of it. Inns became numerous close to the sheep market: the Bear, whose no doubt absentee landlord, the vicar of Blewbury, paid the rather folkloric rent of 12d and a needle without an eye; the Lamb, already long established under Richard Ely; and the George, with William Smyth in occupation under Nicholas Huet. The Chequers, adjoining the Bear, would be added to them soon after. A market place would be an obvious location for inns where richer merchants might stay, and where bargains might be struck over a drink or two.¹⁸

Ock Street had a sprinkling of residents who were prominent in town affairs, although many more of these had invested in head- or sub-leases there and resided elsewhere. Humphrey Bostock had bought the freehold of a tenement with a dovecote, on the north side and rather far out. He was an initial member of both the corporation and of the governing body of the Hospital. A few doors nearer the town centre was Robert Overthrowe's house and garden, also freehold; he was another Hospital governor. Richard Ely of the Lamb was a founder-member of the Corporation and one of the first bailiffs under the charter, and no doubt lived at his inn.¹⁹

¹⁷ Abstract of Borough Leases by AE Preston, BRO, Preston papers, A/AT5, fo.11 no. 57 under 25 March 1577.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Smith and John Carter, *Inns and Alehouses of Abingdon 1550-1978*, (Abingdon, 1989), 76.

¹⁹ James Townsend, *A History of Abingdon* (1910), 109.

The next eighty years or so in the history of the street are, again, not well documented. The Corporation minutes, which ought to have registered lease renewals, are scrappily kept, and a series of original leases, once in the town archives, seems to have been mislaid. Abstracts had been made of them by both AE Preston and John McGowan, but the series was never complete. Leases granted by Christ's Hospital survive but are not made available for study. There are, however, chamberlains' accounts, which record the regular collection of rents on corporation leases, and, in the form of quitrents of a few pence only, on properties held freehold.²⁰

By the time of the Civil War, there had been an improvement in record keeping. Abingdon was the scene of heavy fighting, and in the immediate post-war period there are indications of damage having been caused in Ock Street. On 21 April 1646, John Reason was granted a tenement and backside late in the occupation of Edward Chandler on condition of 'building two space of howsing and slatting the same' and, apparently, let off the usual entry fine. Similarly, on 1 April 1647, Thomas Steede got a lease on the 'piece of ground in Ock Street where (Robert) Cornishe his house did stand' at 10s and without a fine. However, Steede's son and heir John still held the plot in 1687 – whether rebuilt or not is unspecified – and had to pay £2 5s for the renewal.²¹

There are also a number of cases where tenements are subdivided, which may indicate an accommodation shortage, or, alternatively, result from the general impoverishment and high prices of the late 1640s. On 3 September 1646, John Prince, scivier (sievemaker), renewed the lease on 'the messuage wherein he dwelleth' for 10s rent and a fine of £3, except for the part of it now occupied by William Collins, mason, who would pay 5s rent and a 10s fine for his own new lease. On 28 August 1649, Nicholas Butler agreed a similar division with his sub-tenant Robert Evans; they would divide the £1 rent in the proportion of two to one.²²

The wealthier residents of Ock Street at this time, as later, are shown in the tax collection lists of the St Helen's churchwardens, though unfortunately it is usually unclear where in the list Ock Street starts and ends, and the order in which houses were visited was not standard. Yet it is clear that Ock Street in and after the 1650s was home to a number of people on one side rather than the other of the great political and religious divide that had led to the civil war;

²⁰ In the town archives at Abbey House, Abingdon.

²¹ Abingdon Town Archives, Corporation Minutes, Vol 1, fo. 172; Vol 2, fo. 38.

²² Corp Minutes, Vol 1, fos 170v, 174.

men who had credit and influence with the new regimes, but who would become a distrusted and persecuted minority after the restoration of Charles II.

Two of the most important of these were Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Allen and Captain Consolation Fox, although they were never there simultaneously. They had both served in John Hampden's regiment, which had recruited intensively in Abingdon. In 1647 they participated as representatives of their regiment in the Putney debates, when the army settled on the political line that would eventually bring it to power. Allen went on to become a member of the Council of Officers that decided on the execution of Charles I.²³ Both were radical in their religious beliefs. Fox joined the Baptists when a local community was organised by the ex-minister of St Helen's, John Pendarves.²⁴ Allen did not go so far, but became a JP and an active politician at the county level, protecting Baptists and other religious extremists from attack by the dominant Presbyterians.²⁵ Both were recalled to the colours in 1659, during the period of confusion that preceded the fall of the regime; but Allen disappears from all the records thereafter.²⁶ He may have felt it necessary to flee abroad or to go underground after the Restoration. Fox moved into Ock Street, perhaps to the same house as Allen had lived in, set himself up comfortably as a maltster, and remained for many years a thorn in the side of the constables who were charged with preventing or dispersing the now-illegal prayer meetings of the dissenters.²⁷

Other Baptists included Giles Emerson, William Steed, Symon Peck, and Richard Green. They would shortly be joined by members of the wealthy Tomkins family, who bankrolled the community, and by Harim Pleydell, the grocer, lessee of the Corner House on the Sheepmarket.²⁸

It was in 1656 that Ock Street again saw excitement. Benjamin Tomkins had recently provided the Baptists with a burial ground where the Baptist chapel now stands. John Pendarves died in London, and the delay in bringing his body to Abingdon for burial gave time for the funeral to be organised as a great national jamboree of all sorts of religious mystics, including a group of fanatical opponents of the government, the Fifth Monarchy

²³ CH Firth (ed), *The Clarke Papers*, Vol 1 (1891), 437; Vol 2 (1894), 270.

²⁴ BRO, Churchwardens' Presentments, D/A2/c.100.

²⁵ Kew, National Archives, Crown Office Docquet Book C231/6, fo. 268; Calendar of State Papers Domestic (CSPD), 1655, 2.

²⁶ Commons Journal, Vol 7, 683 under 13 June 1659.

²⁷ BRO, Preston papers, A/JQz 11, fos. 37, 64, 68.

²⁸ BRO, Preston papers, A/JQz 11, fos. 12-21; A/JQo 12.

Men. There were serious disorders, and eventually a detachment of cavalry had to be brought in to clear the town of strangers, resulting in a storm of polemic that went on for months.²⁹

As time passed, the status of Ock Street as Abingdon's stronghold of religious dissent became accentuated. In the short-lived 'indulgence' of 1672, both Baptists and Presbyterians worshipped at Symon Peck's barn round the corner in St Edmund's Lane; and when, after 1689, a grudging toleration was extended to nonconformity, both sects established their meeting houses in the street.³⁰ The Presbyterian and later Congregational chapel in the Square was screened from the multitude by a row of cottages. The Quakers, never very numerous in Abingdon and hated equally by the orthodox and by the other dissenting denominations, sited their conventicle at the extreme west end, on the north side, and just east of where the White Horse is today.³¹ In the nineteenth century the Primitive Methodists would respect tradition by building their chapel also in Ock Street, on the south side and a few yards east of the Conduit Road corner. Religion and politics went hand in hand, and, although detailed evidence is lacking, it may safely be assumed that Ock Street became a centre of Whig political organisation opposed to the predominantly Tory principles of the Corporation.

The hearth taxes of the early 1660s are the first occasion since Amyce, and the last until the nineteenth century, to leave us a reasonably complete list of Ock Street residents in a comprehensible order. It is hard to see at what point on their list the assessors actually entered Ock Street, but they moved along the south side from east to west, and returned on the north, ending with Mrs Pleydell – her husband, Samuel, had recently died – at the Corner House on the Sheepmarket.³² They then moved on, either round the corner into Boar Street or along and into the High Street, and it is significant that the next two names to be registered are those of Richard Greene, brasier – to distinguish him from the maltster of the same name – and Philip Lockton, grocer, both prominent Baptists. Assuming that the Ock Street list starts four houses before reaching Mr Ely at the Lamb, and that it finishes with Mrs Pleydell, there are 46 houses that paid the tax, of a total for the town of 220. Assuming also that Ock Street did not differ from the rest of the town in the proportion of householders adjudged too poor to pay tax (30% of the total), it had in 1663 some 21% of the town's occupied houses and this had not changed since Amyce's time. By 1831, the proportion would have risen to 31%.³³

²⁹ William Hughes, *Munster and Abingdon*, (Oxford, 1657); Anon, *The complaining testimony of some of Zion's Children* (1656).

³⁰ BRO, Preston papers, A/JQz 11, fo. 71; Cox, *Story of Abingdon Part 3*, 154-6, 180.

³¹ Cox, *Story of Abingdon Part 3*, 189.

³² Information from David Jarman, Pleydell Society.

³³ National Archives, E179/243/25 (microfilm copy in BRO).

The later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a time of building and expansion. Ock Street, like other streets in Abingdon, had long been a mixture of the grand houses of the wealthy and the smaller tenements of the labouring poor, with numerous industrial buildings that might or might not have doubled as living quarters. Fire risks were considerable. As early as 1664, some corporation lease-holders were being let off entry fines on condition of building stone chimneys, and after 1722 working hemp by candlelight was forbidden under heavy penalties, but this didn't prevent disastrous fires in 1706 and 1734.³⁴ The hearth tax records of 1663 show a range of chimney numbers from one to six, with one property belonging to Master Doctor Tooker, the Archdeacon of Berkshire, having as many as nine. This seems to have been at least partly in industrial use as a malthouse. One wonders whether the learned doctor felt uncomfortable with so many non-conformist neighbours. His successors in residence will have witnessed further colonisation of that sort. Benjamin Tomkins, who died in 1733, left a property on the north side of the street on which the Tomkins Almshouses were to be built. The standard account makes this seem a straightforward transaction, but documents among the Preston Papers at the BRO show it to have been anything but that. Additional land was needed, some of it on lease, and, with the increasing financial sophistication of the period, under mortgage. Furthermore, there were restrictive clauses under wills apparently requiring continued use for given trades. It seems to have been many years before Tomkins's executors could complete their task.³⁵ But by then, a palatial new Tomkins family residence, the Clock House, had been built on the south of the street, which it dominated, as it still does. The Presbyterian and Baptist chapels were embellished, and the latter acquired a residence for its minister at the present 35 Ock Street, fine enough to demonstrate the credit and prominence of his flock in the life of the town.³⁶ The Presbyterian minister lived from 1750 on in another fine residence, leased from the Corporation at the unusually high rent of 40s per year.³⁷

The street went through various embellishments. Richard Ely, landlord of the Lamb Inn, provided an ornamental outlet for the Carswell, one of several streams that flowed south from the Conduit Field and provided the locals with water both for domestic and industrial

³⁴ Town archives, Corporation Minutes Vol 1, fo. 174v; Mienieke Cox, *Abingdon: an 18th century country town* (Abingdon, 1999), 180.

³⁵ BRO, Preston papers, A/AT2.

³⁶ Michael Hambleton, *A Sweet and Hopeful People: The story of the Abingdon Baptist Church 1649-2000* (Abingdon, 2000), 11.

³⁷ Corporation Minutes Vol 2, 347.

purposes.³⁸ The lessee of the spinning house by which it flowed was not allowed to divert the water for his own purposes, though he might do so at night through his neighbours' ditches, 'for their convenience'.³⁹ The new fountain was built on a wall that abutted the house that would later be the Crown Inn, adjoining the almshouses, where is now the entry to Crown Mews. The Lamb itself, though on a narrow 300 x 30 ft site, acquired by 1695 a 'Great Court', which may have represented a demolition of the numerous miscellaneous outbuildings at the back and a roofing over of part of the space.⁴⁰ With the expansion of coach travel, Ock Street once more came to importance as a thoroughfare. By 1753, Mr Richard Clement's Flying Stage Chaise was leaving the Lamb Inn at 6 a.m. three days a week for London, returning the next day, at a fare of 11s, half price for children on lap and outside passengers, dining at Mr Green's at Maidenhead on the way. In 1761, James Croton took over from the late James Dudley a service that left Oxford at 5 a.m. each Monday, stopped at the New Inn in the Abingdon Bury, and then left the town via Ock Street to take a leisurely course to Southampton which was reached by Wednesday afternoon. No doubt there were more such services than we know of. But by the end of the century, because of frequent flooding in Ock Street, the present Spring Road had been turnpiked and through traffic was by-passing the town centre. The corporation had made a strategic error it was to repeat a few decades later, with the coming of the railways.⁴¹

It may, however, have been the needs of passenger and industrial traffic that caused a well-planned but long delayed extension of the sheep-market in the later eighteenth century. Another of Ock Street's unsolved mysteries is the Round Houses that were pulled down in 1769, apparently in preparation for the new lay-out that was not completed until 1790. On their site appeared after 1773 an 'engine', on which goods might be weighed at 1s per ton. It was this that seems to have provided at least some of the backing for the later development of the banking house of Knapp, Tomkins, and Goodall, who held the concession for successive periods at 10s per year, free of entry fines.⁴²

But what is probably the most significant development of the century in Ock Street was the steady advance of manufacturing and service industries. The properties on both sides of the street might still be described in leases by the time-honoured phrases of 'messuage, tenement

³⁸ Agnes Baker, *Historic Abingdon, Fifty-six articles* (Abingdon, 1963), 100-101; AE Preston, 'The Carswell (or Castlewell), Ock Street, Abingdon' *Berks Arch J.* 45 (1941), 37-44.

³⁹ Corporation Minutes Vol 4, 399.

⁴⁰ Corporation Minutes Vol 3, 30.

⁴¹ Alan Rosevear, *Roads across the Upper Thames Valley*, Vol 11, 'Coach and Waggon Services across the Upper Thames Valley', (no place, no date), Figs. 11.7 and 11.12; Vol 7, 'Turnpike Roads through Abingdon', 21.

⁴² Corporation Minutes Vol 3, 105; Vol 4, 27, 34.

and appurtenances' or 'message with orchard and garden ground', but the reality was that the plots were filling with houses whose occupants, without access to land, were dependent on a market where prices were rising to previously unknown levels.⁴³ In 1766, with real living standards lower than at any other time in living memory, there were food riots in Abingdon as there were throughout the country, and their local centre was in Ock Street. Two men, described in the newspaper in an obvious attempt to disarm sympathy for them as 'noted Horse-Takers, and principal Ringleaders in the late Riots in Berkshire', were arrested in Ock Street, while a third escaped across the river.⁴⁴ Attempts by the mob to rescue them were unavailing, and Daniel Ackling, an Ock Street weaver with a wife and six children, was later hanged in Reading.⁴⁵

It was in this period that began the growth of the courts in which the burgeoning population of labourers and industrial workers could find their homes and, often, their livelihood. It does not seem as if any part of Ock Street was ever laid out in burgage plots on a precisely standard module, but most plots seem to have had a frontage of 30 to 35 feet, or half or occasionally twice that. The original house would then be built on the frontage, and might be extended back, or might be side-on to the street. The depth of the plot would generally be determined by the distance to the ditches that ran parallel to the street on both north and south, 100 to 200 feet away. Over time, sheds and outhouses built behind the main houses would become modest residential properties, perhaps in line along the side boundary wall, and sharing a privy and water supply. Eventually, the plot might be divided among two or more lessees, or a single entrepreneur might buy up neighbouring leases and freeholds, and the original arrangement would be obscured. Some of the examples in Part 2 will make the principle clearer.

As the nineteenth century approached, a new harshness seems to have appeared towards lessees and their tenants. People occupying Corporation property are named in leases, but no responsibility was felt towards them. Previously, it had not been unknown for a lease to require a newcomer to give house-room to the widow or children of his deceased predecessor, but such paternalism had now disappeared.⁴⁶ Previously, rentals on head leases had been at levels which never changed and entry fines had moved only between close limits according to the property's refurbishment needs and, perhaps, individual negotiations. They had normally been renewed at fourteen years, and had rarely run to termination at twenty-one. Now

⁴³ Lionel Munby, *How much is that worth?* (British Association for Local History, 1989), 27-8, 33.

⁴⁴ James Townsend, *News of a Country Town* (Oxford, 1914) 59.

⁴⁵ Cox, *An Eighteenth Century Country Town*, 119-20.

⁴⁶ BRO, Preston papers, A/AT5, no 83, page 14; Corporation Minutes Vol 1, fos. 174v, 181v, 183v, Vol 2, fo. 51v.

individual leases were deliberately allowed to run out so that completely new and more profitable terms could be negotiated, and more emphasis was put on redevelopment. When the lease on one particular property with a 20ft frontage ran out in 1817, the occupants were ejected without ceremony and an unstated number of dwelling and spinning houses were demolished. After redevelopment, there was one moderate-sized house with four smaller ones attached in a row behind it. None of the latter was more than 12 ft square, and the 1831 census shows a total of twenty-four people living in them.⁴⁷ The new utilitarianism, in line with the spirit of the age, hurt some but benefited others. The old system effectively subsidised holders of head leases, who included several members of the Corporation, and burdened the ratepayers of Abingdon with higher charges than they might otherwise have paid. Change was overdue and was happening, but without the urgency being demanded by informed local opinion.

However, reform was in the air, and the decade of the 1830s proved almost as revolutionary as that of the 1640s. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 passed through parliament remarkably easily, with the expectation that Old Corruption would be swept away for ever.⁴⁸ The outcome may have been less immediate than some of its proponents might have hoped. Christ's Hospital, about equal in importance to the Corporation as an Ock Street landlord, would not be reformed until forced by the courts twenty years later to change its traditional practices.⁴⁹ After the act, a new list of burgesses, i.e. men qualified to vote in municipal elections, was issued.⁵⁰ They included seventy from Ock Street in an overall total of 272, which was not too far below the proportion of Ock Street residents in the town. But this is misleading. The franchise was based on property holding, and twelve of the seventy burgesses named as of Ock Street apparently simply had property there; they were not shown as resident in the census of 1831.⁵¹ Those that were resident overwhelmingly lived in the eastern half of the street. Forty-two of the fifty-eight identifiable burgesses (72%) lived to the east of the old emplacement of Ruddle Cross, with a further group of four (7%) close to the Tomkins Almshouses. The old Ruddle Cross marked a boundary, perhaps sharper now than it ever had been. To its east was a mixed community, with substantial citizens in relatively large houses with street frontage and a few lesser folk in smaller tenements either on the street or behind it. Westwards was a distinctly proletarian area with mostly small houses, many of them in courts

⁴⁷ Corporation Minutes Vol 4, 151. This would appear on Read's 1838 valuation as Copeland's Court.

⁴⁸ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: The Manor and the Borough, Part 2* (1908), 749-755.

⁴⁹ John Carter and Jacqueline Smith, *Give & Take: Scenes from the history of Christ's Hospital 1553-1900* (Abingdon, 1981) 55-57; Trevor Davies, 'Nineteenth Century Abingdon', unpublished MSc dissertation, Dept for Continuing Education, Oxford, 2005.

⁵⁰ British Library, Add Ms 28666 ff. 275-331.

⁵¹ Transcripts in Abingdon Library and Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, Oxford.

without street frontage, and only a sprinkling of the middling sort. East of Ruddle Cross were sixty-two households, about 19% of the total; to its west were 263. It would be some decades yet before democracy could penetrate the working class end of Ock Street and the slum courts to either side.

Manfred Brod

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