From the author: *Urban Society and Monastic Lordship in Reading, 1350-1600*

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It is with great pleasure that eight years of research into medieval and early modern Reading has culminated in a book. Entitled *Urban Society and Monastic Lordship in Reading, 1350-1600*, this work examines the relationship between the inhabitants of Reading and the abbey that was lord of their town.[1] Rather than focusing solely on the abbey, which was the dominant institution in Reading, the book places greater emphasis on the inhabitants themselves.

In order to provide a more comprehensive view of Reading's history, I extended my research beyond the dissolution of Reading Abbey and continued until the end of the sixteenth century. This allowed for a comparison between life before and after the era of monastic lordship and offers the opportunity for valuable insights into continuity and change in the political, economic, and religious landscape of urban society in Reading.

My initial inspiration for the research came not from Reading but from local history research into Suffolk, the county in which I grew up. While undertaking my master's degree in Medieval Studies, with the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Reading, I studied the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 through a local history of the rebellion in Suffolk. During this violent uprising, the inhabitants of Bury St Edmunds decapitated two of the monks that ruled their town, including the prior who was the most senior figure in the community.[2] This event, along with similar instances, contributed to the general portrayal of monastic towns as sites of violent clashes between lords and tenants.

Discussing this topic with scholars in Reading, however, drew my attention to some of the flaws in this depiction. Despite being the third largest monastic town in England, there is almost no recorded evidence of violent clashes between the abbey and the inhabitants of Reading.

While disagreements did occur, they were typically resolved through negotiation and legal channels. My research, therefore, aimed not only to uncover the history of Reading but also to challenge the traditional view of monastic towns. Reading's story demonstrates the complexity and diversity of relationships between monastic lords and their tenants, highlighting the importance of investigating each case individually rather than making sweeping generalisations.

Reading as a Case Study

Reading, the third largest monastic town in medieval England, receives little mention in existing discussions of monastic settlements. Yet it provides a valuable case study for re-evaluating the history of these towns. This is due to its contrasting methods of resolving disagreements, employing nonviolent means rather than the violent episodes often discussed in other monastic towns.[3] Additionally, Reading is well-suited to study due to its wealth of primary sources, particularly those related to the urban inhabitants under the rule of Reading Abbey, such as merchant guild's records, the churchwardens' accounts, wills, and a 1552 survey by Roger Amyce (the Court of Augmentations' general receiver for Reading and Glastonbury). My study of the town has been supported by the strikingly active community of local historians who have already published many of the records.[4] I am thankful for the support of Joan Dils, in particular, and enjoyed being involved with the Friends of Reading Abbey group during my research.

My monograph takes a thematic approach to examine Reading's evolution, exploring its politics, economics, and religion, rather than a chronological approach. The first chapter sets the context, providing an overview of the town's major institutions and social groupings. Subsequent chapters delve into specific aspects of the town's development.

Chapter 2 focuses on the political life of Reading, with particular attention on the dissolution of Reading Abbey. While this event was significant, other developments in the Middle Ages, such as the merchant guild's growing influence, also contributed to changes in political power. Chapter 3 explores the town's economic life, with a focus on the expansion of the cloth trade in the late fifteenth century.

This development supported political changes and laid the groundwork for self-government after the Dissolution. Contrary to existing depictions of the Reformation era, the loss of the abbey did not cause an economic crisis. Chapter 4 provides a counterbalance to the traditional characterisation of monastic towns as being dominated by the temporal role of monasteries as manorial lords. Instead, the chapter explores the urban community's religious life, revealing a relatively separate existence from that of the monks. The inhabitants' prevailing stance was one of cooperation with government religious policy after the Dissolution, rather than loyalty to Protestant or Catholic ideals.

Urban Society and Monastic Lordship

The study of monastic towns has long been a subject of interest to historians, with Norman Maclaren Trenholme's 1927 work establishing a framework that characterises monastic towns in terms of robust lordship and violent town–abbey relations.[5] Recent research has modified this view, noting that some monastic towns experienced violent rebellion more frequently than others and that it would be wrong to suggest that these towns were always in conflict.[6]

Yet a comprehensive reassessment of monastic towns has been lacking. James Clark's article on the role of monasteries in the spiritual life of the laity represents the most notable revisionist piece.[7] The authority of Clark's reassessment, however, is limited by the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a monastic town. My book takes a precise approach based on local lordship structures, defining a monastic town as one in which a single house was the dominant manorial lord across the entire settlement.

My research, as presented in *Urban Society and Monastic Lordship in Reading*, explores the relationship between the town of Reading's inhabitants and the abbey that was their lord until its Dissolution. The book shifts attention to the inhabitants of Reading, and away from the monastery, in order to challenge traditional views of monastic towns as centres of violent clashes between lords and tenants. One of the book's aims is to demonstrate that, while there were disagreements between Reading Abbey and the urban inhabitants, they tended to be resolved through negotiation and legal channels. There

was almost no recorded violence between the abbey and the inhabitants, contrasting the clashes in certain hotspots that have sometimes been seen to define monastic towns.

In medieval urban society, guilds emerged as the voice of the urban community. In places with no degree of self-government, such as Reading, they served three main functions: organising rebellions, voicing interests through peaceful means, and organising civic and charitable projects. In towns that gained a degree of governmental authority, it was often a guild that would undertake this function, as happened with Norwich's St George's guild.[8] They were regarded with suspicion by monastic lords that resisted granting any degree of autonomy. For this reason, they had less power in monastic towns than their counterparts in places held by different types of lord. Occasionally, monastic lords even attempted to prevent the formation of guilds although, in these cases, informal organisations would often serve the same function.

Guilds leave copious records, but their members were the elite of society. A social history should aim to look beyond this group. Yet the lack of documentary evidence poses a challenge in this respect. My book partly overcomes this by using Social Network Analysis to study collective social groups based on two datasets of legal and financial transactions and surviving wills. Lower-status inhabitants may have left few records individually, but looking at them collectively offers a means to study their social activities.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries

For monastic towns, the Dissolution was more than just a religious event. The sudden removal of a powerful lord meant it had profound consequences on the political, economic, and social life of each town. The fate of these towns varied widely, with manorial lordship initially passing into Crown hands. In some, these rights were passed on to Henry VIII's allies as a reward for their loyalty, while other towns remained royal boroughs. The towns also differed in terms of their success in gaining charters of self-government, with some achieving this swiftly while others never formally gained independence.

A central question is whether the Dissolution heralded a crisis, revolution, or smooth transition for monastic towns.[9] In terms of lordship, the Dissolution was revolutionary, with towns such as Reading going from virtually no independence to self-government in the space of a generation. However, this revolution was in terms of who wielded political power rather than the apparatus of government itself, which saw much continuity. The fact that Reading was able to capitalise on the removal of its monastic lord was due to significant changes in the town–abbey relationship under monastic rule during the late fifteenth century.[10]

It is interesting to explore how inhabitants responded to the Reformation at the grassroots level. With such an uncertain future, the prevailing stance among Reading inhabitants was one of caution and pragmatism regarding religious change.[11] The political elite, in particular, stood to gain from cooperation with the monarch, offering the possibility of being granted both a charter of self-government and former monastic assets. The rest of Reading's inhabitants exercised a similar degree of caution, with few willing to risk their lives to defend either traditional or reformed beliefs. The response of the population to the Dissolution was largely influenced by the perceived benefits and risks of the changes brought about by the new political landscape.

Monastic Towns Reconsidered

Reading provides an opportunity to reconsider the traditional characterisation of English monastic towns. While some elements of this characterisation are supported by the research, such as the robustness of lordship in these towns, other aspects require more nuance. The traditional depiction of violent town–abbey relations oversimplifies the composition of the urban community, which was much broader than the elite guild members who hoped to gain the right to self-government. It also overlooks the integration of urban inhabitants into the administration of these towns. Furthermore, evidence suggests that violence was not as widespread as previously suggested.

Reading, in particular, offers a different model for town–abbey relations, with a less violent means of resolving disagreements. The

excellent records cast light onto the full breadth of the urban community beyond the elite guild members seeking self-government. My monograph invites readers to revisit their assumptions about monastic towns. Reading has proven the ideal case study for revealing the complexity and variety of relationships between monastic lords and urban communities.

Notes

1   J. Chick, *Urban Society and Monastic Lordship in Reading, 1350-1600* (Woodbridge, 2022).

2   J. Chick, 'Leaders and Rebels: John Wrawe's Role in the Suffolk Rising of 1381', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute for Archaeology & History*, 44 (2018), pp. 214-34.

3   Chick, Urban Society, pp. 20-21 & 57-60.

4   C. F. Slade (ed.), *Reading Gild Accounts, 1357-1516*, 2 vols (Reading, 2002); J. M. Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records: Diary of the Corporation, 1431-1654*, 4 vols (London, 1892-96); C. Fleetwood Pritchard (ed.), *Reading Charters, Acts and Orders* (Reading, 1913); J. Dils (ed.), *Reading St Laurence Churchwardens' Accounts, 1498-1570*, 2 vols (Reading, 2013); BRO, D/P96 & 98; F. N. A. Garry and A. G. Garry (eds), *Churchwardens' Accounts of the Parish of St. Mary's, 1550-1662* (Reading, 1893); W. L. Nash (ed.), *The Church-Wardens' Account Book for the Parish of St. Giles, Reading, Part 1, 1518-46* (Reading, 1881).

5   N. Maclaren Trenholme, *The English Monastic Boroughs: A Study in Medieval History* (Columbia, 1927), pp. 1, 94.

6   S. K. Cohn Jr., *Popular Protest in Late Medieval English Towns* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 206.

7   J. G. Clark, 'Religion and Politics in English Monastic Towns', *Cultural and Social History*, 6 (2009), pp. 277-96.

8   B. R. McRee, 'The Mayor and the Saint: Remaking Norwich's Gild of St. George, 1548-49', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79 (2016), pp. 1-20.

9   The case for a crisis is made by Jeanette Martin. See: J. Martin, 'The People of Reading and the Reformation 1520-1570', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading (1987), pp. 357, 587; C. A. Jackson, 'The Berkshire Woollen Industry 1500-1650', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading (1993), pp. 5, 35. The revolution argument is made by Robert Tittler. See: R. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns in England: Politics and Political Culture, c. 1540-1640* (Oxford, 1998), p. 153.

10 Chick, *Urban Society*, pp. 77-89.
11 Chick, *Urban Society*, pp. 140-41; J. Chick, 'Reading: The Reformations', in Anna French (ed.), *Reading the Reformations: Theologies, Cultures and Beliefs in an Age of Change* (Leiden, 2023), pp. 151-74.