

# THE THAMES THROUGH TIME

**The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of  
the Upper and Middle Thames:  
The Thames Valley in the Medieval and  
Post-Medieval Periods AD 1000–2000**

## **Medieval Towns in the Thames Valley AD 1000–1500**



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**Medieval towns in the Thames Valley, c AD 1000–1500**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The definition of a medieval town is not straightforward. Urban historians often preferred to work with the term ‘borough’, which was the definition adopted by Beresford and Finberg (1976) in their hand list of medieval urbanism and which forms the basis for the selection of towns we will be considering here. Boroughs were towns that enjoyed legal privileges that set them apart from other kinds of settlements. Perhaps the most universal of these were privileges relating to the holding of property. In boroughs, unlike in the countryside, property was held for cash rents rather than services or rents in kind, and urban property could be acquired or disposed of freely by purchase, sale, grant or bequest. These property rights are known as burgage tenure. Often, such rights were conferred by means of a borough charter, sometimes along with other urban privileges relating to taxation, trading advantages, and the governance of the town.

Nevertheless, it has always been acknowledged that this definition is too narrow to encompass many places that clearly functioned as towns despite having no surviving evidence of a charter or for burgage tenure. The medieval concept of a borough is, for example, of limited relevance for forms of urbanism that are evident in the middle and late Saxon periods. Moreover, the existence of a borough charter or burgage plots was no guarantee that a place would develop into a successful town. This has led to various attempts to define towns by other criteria, chiefly their functions and their distinctive social, topographical and economic attributes.

These have been much debated, but it is generally agreed that towns operated in various ways as central places for their surrounding area. A town might be the military and defensive stronghold of its region, and the seat of local government, justice and administration. It might also be a key religious focus for its locality, the seat of a bishopric or the site of an important church or monastery. A town was also the commercial focus of the surrounding countryside, with regular and established weekly markets, annual fairs and a wider range of manufacturing and service activity than would be found elsewhere. Early in the medieval period, towns were also places where coins were minted. A town’s economic

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reach would also vary. Small towns essentially served their immediate hinterland, but the largest towns exercised much greater impact over the wider region. The increasing economic power of London, for example, was ultimately to play a decisive role in shaping the urban network of the Thames Valley.

There are several characteristic social and topographical attributes of towns which generally distinguish them from non-urban settlements. Compared with the countryside, towns were places where the population was relatively concentrated. Most towns were much larger than villages, and many had thousands of inhabitants. Even in small towns, urban space tended to be more intensively occupied, with large numbers of people living in small and uniform house plots in a relatively restricted area. Towns were also places where a large proportion of the inhabitants lived by manufacturing, trade, or the provision of services, rather than agriculture, and towns were importers of food from the countryside rather than primary producers. A much wider variety of occupations is attested in towns than in the countryside, and the larger the town the more diverse and specialised these could become. In her seminal volume, Heighway (1972) listed 12 criteria for recognising a town and this approach informed several subsequent town surveys, including those for Oxfordshire (Rodwell 1975) and Surrey (O'Connell 1977).

Embedded in much of the earlier literature on towns is the deterministic doctrine that emphasised the tendency for towns to develop at points of 'geographical advantage', such as crossing-points over rivers or in passes through ranges of hills. While such ideas initially appear attractive, offering simple explanations for the siting of towns, they are deeply flawed in their attribution of active influences to an inanimate topography. No-one would deny that fords and bridges were an important factor in the development of towns, and this is particularly evident in the Thames Valley, but a river crossing was not in itself a guarantee of commercial success. There were many ancient crossings, such as at Appleford and Shillingford, where no urban development ever took place, and others such as Radcot and Standlake where markets were promoted, only to fail. Equally, it is true that Oxford occupies a gap in the Corallian ridge, but other breaches, through the Corallian ridge at Frilford, and through the Chiltern scarp at Goring, failed to attract any sort of urban development.

Even at advantageous locations, towns do not develop spontaneously. There is nothing predestined about their siting, and no guarantee that a 'suitable' site will ensure long-term success. The siting and development of towns are a product of human decisions, and as

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the aspirations and requirements of human society change through time, so does the pattern of urban settlement. The primary function of most medieval towns was trade, and the general layout of towns was, to a large extent, governed by the conditions which influenced the positions of markets. However, the distribution of towns was never even, because some locations were perceived as more advantageous than others. Positions along the boundaries between different types of natural and cultural landscapes, between upland and vale, or between open-field and forest districts, offered opportunities for exchanges of different types of produce, and places where overland routes connected with navigable rivers and roads were often key locations. These factors assumed greater significance with the increasing tendency towards agricultural specialisation from the later medieval period onwards, until the coming of the railways made it possible for goods to be transported across the country in a matter of hours.

To attract trade, ease of access from as many directions as possible was clearly desirable. Where natural obstacles such as hills or rivers intervened, then routeways tended to focus upon fords or gaps which offered an easy passage, but roads could be diverted into towns almost as readily as towns could be located astride pre-existing roads. The foundation of new towns during the 12th and 13th centuries was often accompanied by well-documented diversions of major routes, as at Thame, where in 1219 the bishop of Lincoln acquired the right to divert the line of the old road between Oxford and Aylesbury (Rot. Litt. Claus I, 402; Bond 1990, 96).

#### **The present survey**

This chapter looks at the towns that lie on, or very close to, the Thames. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study to consider towns lying outside the immediate environs of the river, they clearly formed part of wider regional networks beyond the valley itself. Most of the towns reviewed here have evidence for borough status in the medieval period. For the remainder, we have followed previous studies and included places that appear in the county-based surveys of historic towns that have been undertaken since the 1970s (eg Astill 1978; Douthwaite and Devine 1998; Leech 1981; O'Connell 1977; Rodwell 1975). The available evidence is very uneven, and this is inevitably reflected in the account that follows.

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Some towns are much more comprehensively researched and published than others, and Oxford more than any. To an extent, this reflects an imbalance of research effort between large and small towns that is apparent at a national level. Excavations on anything more than a very small scale are rare in the core of the Thames Valley's historic towns. In some places, the archaeological evidence is complemented by modern historical surveys for the Victoria County History (VCH), which have been used extensively in this account. Elsewhere, the VCH volumes are now very dated and the story of some towns is only readily accessible through 'popular' local histories. The recent *Wallingford Burh to Borough* project (Christie and Creighton 2013) has demonstrated just how much can be discovered about the region's historic towns through a programme of focused research combining documentary studies and town plan analysis with small-scale, targeted excavation and non-intrusive survey.

## **THE ORIGINS AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF TOWNS IN THE MEDIEVAL THAMES VALLEY**

### **The urban network up to the 11th century**

Only two medieval towns in the Thames Valley above London had any significant Roman antecedents. Cirencester (Corinium Dobunorum) had been a Roman town of considerable rank, a *civitas* capital of the Dobunni tribe and probably a late Roman provincial capital (Wacher 1995). Staines had been a crossing point of the Thames and is named, as *Pontibus*, in the Antonine Itinerary. In both settlements, there is little to no evidence of continuity of urban functions into the early medieval period, although Staines was to re-emerge as a focal place by the 7th century (Jones 2010, 42–5). Neither town was selected as the site of an Anglo-Saxon bishopric, although both had important churches in the mid–late Saxon period. The one place in the study area that had been both a Roman town and the seat of an Anglo-Saxon bishopric, Dorchester-on-Thames, never developed into a medieval town. The seat of the bishopric was transferred to Lincoln after the Norman Conquest, and the former cathedral at Dorchester was refounded as a house of Arrouaisian canons around 1140 (VCH 1907).

The origins of the urban network of the study region, as elsewhere, can be traced back into the mid–late Saxon period. Evidence for a growing number of places with urban



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attributes at that time has been reviewed in a previous volume in this series (Booth *et al.* 2007). Cricklade, Oxford and Wallingford had been fortified at the time of the first Viking wars in the late 9th or early 10th century and occur in the contemporary list of fortifications known as the Burghal Hidage (Fig. 1). Each guarded a significant crossing of the Thames, and each had been provisioned with a substantial earthen rampart enclosing a roughly square or rectilinear space. At a later stage, the defensive ramparts at Oxford and Cricklade were strengthened and embellished with stone walling, although similar evidence at Wallingford is less clear. At Oxford, stone church towers guarded the north and (probably) the west gates. Oxford and Wallingford became the shire towns of Oxfordshire and Berkshire respectively, and the Domesday Book suggests that they each contained about 400–500 properties, and a population of around 2000 inhabitants, placing them amongst the 20 largest towns in England at the time (Dyer 2000). Cricklade was much smaller, with only 33 properties recorded, suggesting a population of around 150–200 (VCH 2011a, 18, 22).

The historic cores of these towns retain the vestiges of central street grids that are likely to date from the late Saxon period. The interior of Cricklade was divided into four unequal quadrants by intersecting N/S and W/E streets, with a marked irregularity around St Sampson's church in the south-west. St Sampson's is recorded in AD 973, is mentioned again in Domesday Book, and it retains some possible stonework of the late 11th century (WC 2009). Dating of the very regular burgage plots along the N/S axis of the High Street is unclear, though this is likely to have been the location of the early properties of the late Saxon period and Domesday (*ibid.*; VCH 2011a, 18, 22). It has been suggested that considerable areas of the interior, particularly in the NW quadrant, may have been open ground. Initially, at least, this may have served as space for mustering troops, accommodating people in times of trouble, and/or for pasturing animals.

A very similar grid consisting of two principal crossing N/S and W/E street axes formed the basic structure of the interior of Wallingford, although on a considerably larger scale (see Christie and Creighton 2013). It is suggested that the NE quadrant in the late Saxon period was a royal enclave, possibly occupied by a hall complex where a force of housecarls was accommodated by the early 11th century (*ibid.*, 395, fig. 10.1). The NW and SW quadrants, now the Bullcroft and Kinecroft, were perhaps always intended to be left clear of development and, as at Cricklade, may have been used for the mustering and encampment of troops and the pasturing of horses and other animals. Areas for occupation may only have

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been established within the SE quadrant, near to the river frontage and presumed wharfage, and outside the southern defences around the South Gate where there may have been a pre-existing nucleus of some kind (ibid.). The N/S street widens south of the central crossroads into what is today the town's market place, and this space may have served for marketing or military functions. Identifiable early churches include St Leonard's, with late Saxon/early Norman stonework and St Martin's at the central crossroads, now lost but identified recently in excavations that suggested a late 10th-century origin. The lost church of St Lucian outside the town to the south may have been in existence before the town was fortified (ibid., fig. 10.1).

At Oxford, it is possible that a small, square fortification dating to the reign of King Alfred was soon extended, perhaps both to the west and the east, to form the elongated rectangular space occupied by the medieval town. The antecedents of the late Saxon town at Oxford are clearer than at either Cricklade or Wallingford, possibly because much more archaeological investigation has taken place. A mid-Saxon timber bridge provided a route across the Thames channels to the south, and there is increasing evidence to suggest that the Saxon minster of St Frideswide stood alongside it (Dodd 2003). Like Cricklade and Wallingford, Oxford has principal intersecting N/S and W/E street axes, and the late Saxon origins of these have been confirmed by numerous observations of a characteristic well-made surface of small stones beneath the modern roads. A coin of Edward the Elder, *c* AD 920, provides the best dating evidence for their establishment. No clear evidence has been identified at Oxford for areas of open space and much of the town was built up, at least along its principal street frontages, by the early 11th century. Streets with the same characteristic early surfacing have been identified in the NE, NW and SW quarters of the town, suggesting that the space between the main axial routes here was subdivided from an early date. Within the SE quarter, limited evidence suggests development in the early 11th century (Radcliffe 1961–2). By the time of the Norman Conquest, in addition to St Frideswide's, there is documentary evidence to confirm the existence of the churches of St Martin's at Carfax and St Ebbe's, both originally private churches on urban estates. St Michael's was established at the North Gate, and St Mary the Virgin and St Peter's were founded near the East Gate. By 1122, the churches of All Saints, St Mildred's, St Edward's and St Peter le Bailey are recorded, along with the chapels of St Michael at the South Gate and Holy Trinity at the East



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Gate. Excavations at St Aldate's have revealed late Saxon burials, but the date of the church itself remains unconfirmed (Dodd 2003).

Both Wallingford and Oxford saw significant changes following the Norman Conquest. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that William brought his army across the Thames at Wallingford, where he received the submission of Wigod the 'staller', constable of the Saxon garrison, and Stigand, the Archbishop of Canterbury. A motte-and-bailey castle of earth and timber was constructed within the NE corner of the defences and was certainly in use in some form by 1071, when the Abbot of Abingdon was imprisoned there on suspicion of complicity in a rebellion (Christie and Creighton 2013, 151, 216–7, fig. 5.35). The first phase of the castle, as elsewhere, seems to have incorporated the standing Saxon rampart into its northern and eastern defences. Shortly afterwards, the collegiate church of St Nicholas was established just outside the castle defences to the south, possibly a re-establishment of a late Saxon institution. Domesday Book records the destruction of eight properties for the building of the castle. Within a generation of the establishment of the castle, the Benedictine Priory of the Holy Trinity was founded within the NW quadrant of the town, possibly on the site of a pre-existing late Saxon church. The priory was said to have been founded by Geoffrey the Chamberlain between 1077 and 1093 and given to St Alban's Abbey. The abbey oversaw the construction of the buildings and provided the first monks, and the priory remained a cell of St Alban's until its suppression by Cardinal Wolsey in 1524 (ibid., 258). Domesday Book records the presence of 22 Frenchmen at Wallingford, which might imply the creation of a distinct French borough or zone, although there is currently no clear evidence for its location.

At Oxford, the building of the castle was recorded by the monks of Abingdon Abbey as taking place in 1071. The chosen site lay within the SW corner of the late Saxon defences, and recent excavations have demonstrated that the late Saxon defences were incorporated into a massive bailey rampart. The standing motte is thought to have been constructed at the same time and was surrounded by a substantial ditch. Domesday Book records much waste in Oxford. It is likely that some of this was associated with the destruction of houses for the building of the castle, and excavations have demonstrated occupation of the late Saxon period on the castle site (Poore *et al.* 2009). The early Norman castle complex at Oxford also incorporated the surviving, stone-built St George's Tower. The date of the tower is not known for certain, but its position on the line of the late Saxon rampart suggests the

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possibility that it was associated with a pre-existing gate church here. The collegiate church of St George was founded at the castle by the first castellan Robert d'Oilly in 1074 (VCH 1979, 381), possibly as a re-foundation of a late Saxon church. Elsewhere, however, archaeological excavations in various locations throughout the town centre have revealed sites where buildings of the early 11th century had been abandoned and lay apparently unoccupied for decades after the Conquest, and it is possible that such places also contributed to the recorded waste (Dodd 2003, 53). By the end of the 11th century, however, there are signs that Oxford's fortunes were reviving. The most important initiative at the time was probably the reconstruction of the Thames-crossing south of the town as a substantial stone causeway, known as the Grandpont, across the floodplain. Davis (1973, 258–60) claims that this was the main route for heavy traffic going south from Oxford, leading initially to Hinksey Hill.

Domesday Book records two other towns in the study area. Reading was the location of a large royal manor, a smaller manor belonging to the minster church which had been given to Battle Abbey, and a small borough in which the king held 28 properties and the abbey 29. The existence of coins minted at Reading in the 1040s suggests that a town may have been promoted at the site as a market for the royal and minster estates by or during the reign of Edward the Confessor (Astill 1978). Nothing of this early town has yet been identified in excavation, but it has suggested that it was probably located around St Mary's Church, itself mentioned in Domesday Book, in an area later referred to as the old market (*ibid.*). At the edge of the Kennet floodplain to the south, excavations have found slight traces of timber buildings that may date to the late 11th or early 12th century (Ford *et al.* 2013, 281–2). Earlier investigations of the floodplain and the site of the 12th-century Benedictine abbey recovered evidence for late Saxon or early Norman reinforcement of river channels that may already have been serving as mill leats (Hawkes and Fasham 1997, 16–8, 50–1).

Old Windsor was also a substantial royal manor and had become prominent in the later years of Edward the Confessor's reign as a location for royal councils. Keene (2015) comments that although only two or three royal councils are certainly known to have been held there by Edward, there is a notable cluster of landholdings belonging to members of the royal family and royal servants in the vicinity. This suggests that Old Windsor and nearby places were often used by the court on journeys through the area, and for court assemblies and hunting. Edward granted Old Windsor to Westminster Abbey towards the end of his life,

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but it was soon taken back by William the Conqueror, who built a motte and bailey castle overlooking the Thames a short distance to the north. The Anglo-Norman kings frequently stayed at Windsor, and until the early 12th century it is likely that they used residential accommodation at the old site. Henry I is thought to have begun the development of residential accommodation at the castle itself, and is recorded as spending the Whitsun festival ‘at the new Windsor’ in 1110 (ibid.). Domesday Book suggests that there were 95 house plots *in villa*, which may mean that they were clustered together within a larger estate that retained a sizeable agricultural component. Excavations at the site revealed evidence for several timber buildings measuring 3–4m wide and 8m long, set close together on similar east–west alignments, which might suggest they were laid out along a street. There was some evidence for the working of bone and iron, and the pottery suggests the area was intensively occupied for around 100 years from the mid-11th to the mid-12th century.

Domesday Book records urban attributes in association with several other places in the Thames Valley, though none were called ‘towns’. The most enigmatic of these was Staines, which was a large manor belonging to Westminster Abbey and presumably still a place where the Thames could be crossed, as recorded by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* with regards to the Danish Army crossing at *Stana* in 1009. The Roman road leading to the crossing survived in continuous use. Domesday Book records 94 agricultural tenants and 46 burgesses. These have generally been assumed to have been living in London; a writ confirming Edward the Confessor’s grant of the manor in 1065 or 1066 describes the gift as *Stana mid tham lande Staeningahaga withinnon Lundone*, and *Staeningahaga* has generally been identified with Staining Lane off Cheapside in the heart of the City (VCH 1962). Excavation at Staines has revealed a substantial mid-to-late Saxon minster settlement at Binbury, and the *monasterium* at Staines is mentioned in the Domesday Book entry for East Burnham, Bucks, from which it received payments. The subsequent discovery of a late Saxon execution cemetery on the London Road has prompted some reconsideration of the location of the burgesses, since the presence of the cemetery suggests that late Saxon Staines may have had some of the administrative functions of a *burh* (Hayman and Reynolds 2005; Jones 2010, 43). If so, however, it appears that there was subsequently a decline in the 11th and early 12th century (Jones 2010, 44).

Domesday Book records markets at Cirencester, Bampton and Cookham, and refers to 10 merchants dwelling before the gate of the abbey at Abingdon. The markets at Cirencester

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and Cookham were said to be new. At the time of the Domesday survey, most of Cirencester lay within the large royal manor, to which the new market belonged, along with around 63 listed peasant tenants and serfs. The excavated evidence for the minster church of Cirencester suggests that it dates from the early 9th century (Wilkinson and McWhirr 1998), and it had a third share of the king's revenue from the market. The comment that before the Conquest the queen had the sheep's wool hints that Cirencester may already have been a significant wool market. During the 10th and 11th centuries, several meetings of the Witan are recorded at Cirencester. The minster was located within the north-east corner of the former Roman town, whose wall, although now ruinous, continued to serve as the administrative boundary of the medieval town for much the period. The Roman gates appear still to have been in use as entrances, but otherwise the medieval street plan owes little to the former Roman layout. It is possible that by the late 11th century, the market was taking place outside the minster gates.

Bampton was also the location of a large royal manor and a minster church. By the time of the Domesday survey, what had presumably originally been a very large minster estate had been subdivided, with the largest share and revenue from the market in the king's hands. A second manor of six hides was held by Exeter Cathedral, and a third of four hides was held by Robert d'Oilly. The three manors included many outlying settlements and there is no way of assessing how many people were living in Bampton itself, but over 110 peasant tenants and slaves are recorded in total, implying a local population of around 400–500 people. Blair has suggested that the early plan of Bampton was based on an oval enclosure around the church and excavations have revealed a 4m-wide ditch, backfilled around 1100 (Booth *et al.* 2007, 248–51, fig. 5.30). The street now known as Church View leads towards this enclosure and it has been suggested that this originally formed the west side of a funnel-shaped open space, possibly used for marketing, and a small sunken or cellared building dated to the 11th century was partly revealed on the eastern frontage of this space (Mayes *et al.* 2000).

Cookham was also the site of an important minster church, documented in 798 but probably older. By the time of the Domesday survey, a manor of 20 hides was in the hands of the king, together with the revenues from the new market. Regenbald the priest held the church and land here for the king, and small holdings were in the hands of two clerks. Cookham was the site of an important Thames ferry crossing, the significance of which is underlined by the identification of Sashes Island in the river here with the *Sceaftesege*

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fortification of the Burghal Hidage. The crossing was later superseded by the building of bridges at Marlow and Maidenhead. Astill (1978) has suggested that the minster was probably on the site of the present village church, and this may have been the focus of the late Saxon settlement. Two blocks of burgage plots were subsequently laid out on either side of the high street, probably around the 12th century (*ibid.*; Booth *et al.* 2007, 101, fig. 3.28).

In 1086, the later town of Abingdon formed part of Abingdon Abbey's manor of Barton. The abbey was founded around 954 as part of the 10th-century Benedictine reform movement (and as a refoundation of an earlier minster). The site of the abbey and the nucleus of the town were within the defences of a former Iron Age 'enclosed oppidum', which were maintained as the town boundary throughout the medieval period (Brady *et al.* 2007). There are over 130 recorded inhabitants of the manor, including 10 people described as merchants living outside the abbey gate, implying a population of around 500–650. There is surprisingly little evidence for occupation of this date in the town. However, excavations at the former SEB showroom on West St Helen Street in 2002–3 found small quantities of pottery in late Saxon Shelly and St Neot's type wares, which would be consistent with activity of the 10th or early 11th century (*ibid.*).

#### **The early 12th century**

After the upheavals of the Conquest, the early 12th century was a time of revival in the Thames Valley, at least until disturbances in the 1140s. Royal itineraries from the time of Henry I onwards suggest that the court regularly travelled through the region, crossing the Thames at Staines and proceeding to the favoured hunting lodge at Woodstock via Windsor, Reading, Wallingford and Oxford, or to Gloucester and the west via Reading, Newbury, Marlborough and Cirencester, or to and from Woodstock and the west via Bampton, Faringdon, Lechlade, Fairford and Cirencester, with Thames crossings at Radcot and Lechlade (Rosevear 1995). Perhaps partly because of this political importance, the towns of the region saw significant elite investment in the early 12th century. Wallingford probably reached the height of its medieval prosperity and importance at this time. A surviving arch in Wallingford Bridge appears to be of 12th-century construction and may be the clearest evidence yet for the existence of a bridge by this time that incorporated at least some stone

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elements (Christie and Creighton 2013, 229, fig. 6.8). The motte-and-bailey castle complex of the late 11th century was expanded with the addition of a second, concentric bailey (later the ‘middle bailey’) during the first half of the 12th century (*ibid.*, 189–90, 215–7, fig. 5.35).

Excavations have identified numerous sites with evidence for occupation between the 11th and 13th centuries in the town centre, spreading northwards along Castle Street with the development of the town’s ‘castle quarter’ and into the former open space of the Kinecroft (*ibid.*, 293–52, figs 8.32–3). A leper hospital across the river at Crowmarsh was supported, although not necessarily founded, by the Empress Matilda, who also granted land for the Hospital of St John the Baptist outside the South Gate in the 1150s. At its peak, Wallingford had 11 parish churches. This high point is likely to have been reached in the 12th century, although the early decline of the town and subsequent loss of most of these churches means that there is currently little certain evidence for most of them (*ibid.*, 288–92). The only substantial suburban occupation seems to have been outside the South Gate, and may represent overspill from the south-east quadrant where most of the houses were located. Evidence suggests there was a wide road leading from the south into the South Gate, later infilled, where there may have been a suburban market for corn and livestock and a place where tolls were collected from those going to trade in the town (*ibid.*, 340). No suburbs developed to the north or west of the town. Christie and Creighton (*ibid.*, 341) suggest this reflects the fact that Wallingford’s interior never reached full capacity, but they also note that the land to the west had a continuing and important function as the town commons, while the land to the north may have been deliberately kept clear of development as an open space for use by the high-status households of the castle.

Oxford saw a considerable level of elite investment in the early 12th century and all the evidence suggests that it was developing rapidly at this time. A merchant gild existed by 1100 and the first known town charter was granted by Henry II around 1155. By 1191, the citizens had a common seal, and in 1199 they obtained the fee farm of the town (VCH 1979, 50). The late Saxon minster of St Frideswide’s was refounded by Henry I as an Augustinian priory around 1120 and a major campaign of rebuilding was underway from the middle of the 12th century. A second Augustinian house, Oseney Abbey, was founded just outside the town to the west by Robert d’Oilly II in 1129, and the leper hospital of St Bartholomew had been founded half a mile east of the town by the same date. Godstow Nunnery was founded on the Thames floodplain west of Oxford around 1133, and the Hospital of St John was founded



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near the East Gate by the end of the century. A total of 13 churches and chapels are recorded in the town in 1122 (see above), when seven of them were confirmed by Henry I to St Frideswide's. Three suburban churches are also recorded for the first time in the early 12th century. St Cross in the eastern suburb of Holywell was a chapel of St Peter in the East and has a surviving chancel arch dated to *c* 1100 (RCHME 1939, 128–9). The church of St Mary Magdalen outside the Northgate was confirmed to St George's in the Castle in 1127, and the church of St Giles had been built by 1133 (VCH 1979, 381). The royal castle at Oxford was quickly abandoned as a royal residence, and Henry I had a new palace built just north-west of the town at Beaumont, spending Easter there in 1132. Oxford, like Wallingford, became a key strategic focus during the Anarchy, particularly in 1141–2 when Matilda was besieged at the castle. The impact of this on the growth of the town and its economy is hard to assess, but there is little doubt that Oxford grew substantially from the mid to late 12th century onwards.

Although there is relatively little information about Cricklade at this time, the church of St Mary was built at the north end of the high street during the early 12th century, possibly on the site of an older church or chapel, and it has been suggested that the course of the Thames may have been diverted by this time in order to provide a channel to drive mills and bring boats and water to the town (VCH 2011a, 23–4). The Port Mill is recorded by 1198 (*ibid.*, 44).

Three of the region's most important abbeys were established in this period, at Cirencester, Eynsham and Reading, all re-foundations of earlier churches, and these are linked with evidence for urban development. The minster at Cirencester was refounded as an Augustinian abbey by Henry I around 1130 and was endowed with the substantial possessions of Regenbald the Chancellor, who had served both Edward the Confessor and William I and had amassed 16 churches and land in five counties. The abbey does not, at first, seem to have held much land within the town itself and the royal manor remained in the king's hands, although Henry II allowed the abbey all its revenues to finance the building works. Burgesses are first mentioned at Cirencester in 1133 (Leech 1981; Darvill and Gerrard 1994). The medieval town seems largely to have been developed within the northern part of the Roman walled area, focused on a market place in front of the abbey. This had presumably been the location of the market since at least Domesday. The parish church was begun by the abbey in the mid-12th century at the abbey gate, fronting onto the market place. It has been suggested that the west side of Cricklade Street shows evidence for a planned origin, with a

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consistent rear property boundary for its entire length, while the properties in Dyer Street were probably laid out later (Leech 1981). Gloucester Street, outside the Roman walled circuit to the north, may have been a planned suburb with regularly laid-out boundaries. This was the line of Roman Ermin Street, the main route north towards Gloucester, with a bridge (Gildenbrigge) across the river Churn. A castle at Cirencester is mentioned in the *Gesta Stephani* as being fortified by the Empress Matilda in 1142, ‘next to the holy church belonging to monks’. The castle was abandoned by its garrison, demolished by Stephen, and its location is now uncertain. The Hospital of St John the Evangelist was probably founded during the reign of Henry I or Henry II, but the leper hospital of St Lawrence, on the corner of Gloucester St and Barton Lane, is thought to have been founded considerably later during the later 13th century. After the death of Henry II, the abbey bought the royal manor and the market from Richard I. By the late 12th century there may have been two markets, held on Mondays and Fridays, and a fair was granted in 1253.

The Benedictine abbey at Eynsham had been founded in 1005 but seems to have experienced something of a hiatus after the Conquest, when Remigius, Bishop of Lincoln, planned to transfer its monks and assets to Stow in Lincolnshire. His successor, Robert Bloet, reversed this policy and in 1109 a new charter was issued re-establishing the abbey at Eynsham, where it was extensively rebuilt (for the rebuilding of the abbey, see Hardy *et al.* 2003). The abbey was granted a market in the 1130s, followed by two fairs, granted in the period 1154–66 (VCH 1990). The plan of Eynsham was discussed by Aston and Bond (2000) who suggest that three or four distinct phases can be identified. The earliest, represented by the High Street and Acre End Street, was probably the original agricultural nucleus, with a market place that looks like an intrusion into the older east–west street alignment. To the south of this alignment lay the abbey precinct and the abbey’s home farm, separated by the road to Stanton Harcourt. The next element to be added was a block of properties to either side of Mill Street, which Aston and Bond (*ibid.*) suggest may represent an extension contemporary with the acquisition of the market in the 1130s. The holdings along Acre End Street, High Street and Mill Street presumably formed what was known as the old borough. Some of its inhabitants were held by burgage tenure and it had its own court, or portmoot, which was held on Mondays. The new borough of Newland was added in the early 13th century.

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The Benedictine abbey at Reading was founded by Henry I in 1121 on a site to the east of the suggested early town around St Mary's (Fig. 2). The foundation grant included all the royal possessions at Reading as well as its minster church and estate, which Henry recovered from the Abbot of Battle in return for lands in Sussex. Henry also granted Reading Abbey two fairs. The abbey's development of the town seems to begin in the late 12th century (see below), but excavations have recovered evidence of two early 12th-century mills on channels of the Kennet, and the construction of a building that may have been used for ironworking at the edge of the Kennet floodplain (Ford *et al.* 2013, 282–3). This building was soon replaced by a more substantial structure of stone and timber, with a large metallised yard and a heavily used internal hearth. Remains of a wide range of animal species was recovered from internal deposits of this building, including bones of pig, cattle, sheep/goat, hare, partridge, duck, chicken and other birds, and it is interpreted as the earliest phase of a public cookshop, subsequently greatly developed (*ibid.*). Henry's foundation charter imposed a special responsibility on Reading Abbey, to feed and shelter visitors, pilgrims and the poor.

There are also clear signs of contemporary development at the older Benedictine abbey sites of Abingdon and Chertsey. Abingdon Abbey had a market by the reign of Henry I, and there are references to it in 1107 and 1110. The market place was probably in its later location, west of the abbey gate (Fig. 3). St Nicholas's Church forms the north side of the main abbey gateway, and was built probably in the mid-to-late 12th century for the abbey's large lay population. On the south side of the abbey gateway are the surviving later buildings of St John's Hospital, founded by 1121–30. In a recent review of evidence for early town planning in Abingdon, Thomas (2010, 55–9) has suggested that the market place may have been extended further to the south-west in the 12th century, incorporating the area between the High Street and Lombard Street, with the block of properties here representing an extension of the market. At much the same time, the abbey may have laid out blocks of properties to rent along the edge of its precinct, on the east side of Stert Street and on the north edge of its vineyard (along the south side of the street of the same name). Excavations along the Vineyard have revealed evidence for medieval pits extending back some 25 m from the street frontage; finds from the pits suggest that the area was in occupation from the 11th/12th century right through the medieval period.

Chertsey was the site of an important mid-Saxon minster that was refounded as a Benedictine Abbey in 964 (Fig. 4). Little is currently known of the late Saxon abbey, but it

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was probably on the same site as its post-Conquest successor. In 1135, Henry I granted the abbey the right to hold a market and fair, and limited archaeological work in the town suggests that this was essentially the stimulus for its medieval development, which dates from the 12th century onwards. The abbey largely dictated the layout of the town, which, as at Abingdon, was established along the edge of the abbey precinct. All the evidence suggests that the original medieval town was closely focused along Windsor Street, London Street and Guildford Street, which form a T-junction adjacent to the parish church of St Peter, where the market place was established. St Peter's, formerly All Saints, is thought to have replaced a chapel built on this site in the 12th century for the townspeople (O'Connell 1977, 11). Excavations at 14–16 London Street, close to the centre of the medieval town, revealed settlement dated to the first half of the 12th century (Poulton 1998, 6, 15). The southern extent of the town was dictated by the edge of the gravel island bounded by the floodplain of the Bourne which flows east–west. A bridge probably existed here before the 13th century and beyond the Bourne was the southern suburb of Styvington. The suburb may have been developed by the energetic Abbot Rutherwyk in the 14th century, when the bridge was rebuilt in stone, but a 12th- or 13th-century origin remains a possibility. Blair (1991, 56–9) has drawn attention to the number of Chertsey Abbey manors that have nucleated settlements with a regular appearance, and suggests that both the town and several villages may reflect a systematic policy, perhaps linked with the building of new churches on Abbey estates around the mid-12th century. Chertsey lies near an important crossing point of the Thames (distanced some 1,200m), but the earliest evidence for a bridge over the Thames at Chertsey is *c* 1410 when Henry IV granted a licence for building one there (Stratton and Pardoe 1982, 115). In the 12th and 13th centuries the crossing was made by ferry.

Signs of developments in other towns can be seen in the early 12th century. Henry I had constructed royal accommodation at Windsor Castle by 1110, and a planned new town was laid out around the castle by 1135. The first explicit reference to a borough occurs in the Pipe Roll of 1130–31 (Beresford and Finberg 1973, 69). The early town comprised a market place, established *c* 1135, which was aligned with the lower ward of the castle and the parish church of St John the Baptist (<http://www.historictownsatlas.org.uk/content/windsor-eton-about-1860>). The church was probably built around 1135 as part of the setting out of the town, although it is not documented until 1182, and the medieval church here was demolished in 1820. Two early streets led into Market Place. Peascod Street is first

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mentioned around 1177 and it was probably laid out along a much older route as it marks the parish boundary. The name is thought to derive from *peas-croft*, denoting the land it crossed or led to. Thames Street (formerly Bishop Street) led from Market Place to Windsor Bridge. The bridge itself, although not documented until 1191, is thought to have been built around 1171 as part of a general phase of improvements, when the timber palisade around the Upper Ward was replaced by a stone circuit with towers. The leper hospital of St Peter was founded south of the town by Henry II in 1169. The town mill, located near the bridge, is first documented in 1219 but was probably built in the early 12th century.

Fairford appears in Domesday Book as a large manor formerly held by Queen Matilda. By 1100 it was in the hands of the royal favourite Robert fitz Hamon, and passed after his death to the Earls of Gloucester. It was in an important location, where the main roads from Gloucester and Cirencester to London crossed the river Coln. Presumably the crossing was initially made by the ford preserved in the town name, though a bridge over the Coln is recorded by the late 12th century (VCH 1981, 71). There were Tuesday and Friday markets at Fairford by 1135, and the triangular market place is likely to be at the core of the early town, immediately east of the town bridge. Burgage plots along the east side of the High Street and the south side of London Road were probably laid out at an early stage, and Back Lane, south of London Road, may have been an early access to the rear of the tenement plots. A grant of a burgage plot in the town is recorded by 1183 (*ibid.*, 74). The record of a priest at Fairford in Domesday Book suggests the church may be on an old site; however, it retains only a little fabric of the 13th and 14th centuries, and was elaborately rebuilt in the 15th century.

#### Expansion in the late 12th and 13th centuries

The period from the late 12th century to the early 14th century was a period of rapid population growth and economic expansion. Within the present study region, as elsewhere, new town promotions were added to the urban network, and existing towns were re-planned and extended. In Surrey and Middlesex, for example, there is a very distinct pattern of the establishment of a network of small planned towns in the late 12th and early 13th century (cf Poulton 1998, 240). It is interesting to note, however, that by the 13th century there are signs

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of limits to urban expansion, with some promotions failing to take hold, and some places such as Wallingford appearing to have passed their peak. This period sees a marked shift in emphasis from the Upper to the Middle Thames Valley. Lechlade is the only new town successfully promoted in the Upper Thames after the middle of the 12th century, but in the Middle Thames Valley this period saw the foundation or revival of a group of riverside towns, Henley, Marlow, Maidenhead, Staines and Kingston, in each case closely connected with the building of Thames bridges.

#### *Towns of the late 12th century*

Several towns appear or re-appear as urban places in the late 12th century, and the contribution of archaeology has been particularly important in identifying late 12th-century developments in towns for which the earliest documentary evidence does not appear until the 13th century. Henley had probably long been a Thames crossing point, forming part of the large royal estate centred on Benson (VCH 2011b, 31). By the mid-12th century, and possibly much earlier, there was a royal lodge on the site of what is now Phyllis Court and Countess Garden and King Stephen is likely to have issued a charter at Henley. In 1177–8, the Crown resumed control of the manor of Benson after the expiry of a lease and it is clear that Henry II was taking an active interest in the development of new royal buildings at Henley (ibid.). A new bridge was constructed across the Thames, at least partly, if not wholly, in stone; elements of the original bridge have been recorded within a cellar, and in excavation, and it is very likely that the laying out of the first streets of the medieval town dates from this time (Fig. 5). This process may have involved the upgrading of a pre-existing routeway leading to the Thames crossing, and long, narrow houseplots were laid out to the north and south of what are now Market Place and Hart Street, both called High Street in the medieval period. A series of smaller plots were laid out along Bell (or North) Street, probably as far as the southern boundary of the manor house. The properties along the High Street seem to have been created to standard dimensions of one-and-a-half perches in width (7.5m), with lengths varying between 19 and 32 perches (96–161m). Along Bell Street, the plots were two perches wide, but only 10–16 perches long (VCH 2011b, 32, fig. 7).



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Marlow appears in Domesday Book as a valuable riverside estate that was divided between four manors. The total recorded population of agricultural tenants and slaves was 107, and the largest manor, which had been held by Queen Matilda, accounted for more than half of these and may have included a settlement on the site of the present town. The earliest documentary evidence for the existence of the town is a reference to burgage rights in 1183 (Pipe Rolls 29, Henry II). The right to hold a market was confirmed to the Earl of Gloucester in 1227 but was probably older, and two fairs are recorded in the 14th century. The first mention of the bridge is in 1227. The town plan suggests two possible areas of early development (Green and Beckley 2014, 40, fig. 16). The first consists of the block of land adjacent to the river and the church, where the early manor seems to have been focused (with the original manorial centre possibly at the Court House or Manor House). Here, St Peter's Street led to the bridge across the Thames prior to its relocation a short distance upstream in the 19th century. It is suggested that prior to the creation of the planned town St Peter's Street may have extended northwards to join the main west–east axis of West Street/Spittal Street. The exceptionally long and regular burgage plots to either side of the High Street are likely to represent the laying out of the planned town, and if the theory about the original significance of St Peter's Street is right, then these new burgage plots would have cut across the earlier alignment, with High Street superseding the earlier route as the principal north–south axis (ibid., 38). However, the recovery of 11th- to 12th-century pottery from excavations at 82–86 High Street suggests that there was occupation along this line from an earlier date, and the High Street might represent the primary settlement focus. On the west side of the High Street the alignment of Mill Lane suggests it could have served as a back lane for the burgage plots. The parish church of All Saints may be the church mentioned in an account of Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester who was said to have visited the church at Marlow in 1070 (ibid., 29). In 1107, Henry I confirmed Robert fitz Hamon's grant of the church to Tewkesbury Abbey, but ownership was later much disputed by the abbey and the Earls of Gloucester who succeeded in regaining it in 1247 (VCH 1925). A description of the church in 1806 mentions a Norman west tower (Green and Beckley 2014, 35, fig. 14), but the medieval building was apparently destabilised by recurrent flooding in the late 18th and early 19th century and was demolished and entirely rebuilt in 1832.

The medieval town of Staines was established by the late 12th century. It is located at the confluence of the river Coln and the Thames, and archaeological work has shown that the

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Roman and medieval settlements were focused on gravel islands within the floodplain of the rivers, separated by several minor channels. Mid-to-late Saxon occupation has been found at Binbury, around the parish church of St Mary, but by the 11th to 12th centuries the focus was shifting back to the island formerly occupied by the Roman town (the ‘town island’). Slight traces of 11th- and early 12th-century activity have been identified here, including a 12th-century wooden cup, and part of a building with flint pebbled footings associated with a path (Jones 2010, 34, fig. 1.17). The bridge at Staines is first mentioned in documentary sources in 1222, when the king granted a tree from Windsor Forest for its repair, but the archaeological evidence for its approach road suggests an earlier origin. Excavations in 1989 at the Mackay Securities site identified part of this road. Although it passed only through the south-eastern corner of the trench, it was seen to be formed of layers of gravel metalling and was retained by a timber revetment of piles and horizontal timbers. Dating evidence suggested it had been constructed in the mid-to-late 12th century (*ibid.*, 35, 315–16). Staines was an important Thames crossing, and until the building of Maidenhead Bridge it was frequently used for access along the Thames Valley from Westminster to Windsor and beyond (Rosevear 1995, 13). Wardens were responsible for the maintenance of the bridge from as early as 1228, and its upkeep was primarily the responsibility of the men of Staines. A market at Staines is first mentioned in 1218, when the market day was ordered to be changed from Sunday to Friday, and ten years later Westminster Abbey obtained the grant for a fair. Jones (2010, 44) has suggested that the Abbey’s development of the town may have been a response to development at Chertsey, which was perhaps seen as contributing to the early to mid-12th-century decline of Staines suggested by its archaeological record. Property plots along both sides of the High Street were probably burgages laid out at the foundation of the new town, and the backlands led to the regularly flooded marginal land beyond the island (*ibid.*). A West Bar and an East Bar mentioned in the late 13th century (VCH 1962, 16) probably controlled access at each end of the town island. Occupation evidence starts to appear again at numerous excavated sites from the late 12th century. A large stone building with three bays and massive mortared-rubble foundations, dated to the late 12th or early 13th century, stood very close to the market and bridge (Jones 2010, 35, fig. 4.16). The parish church of St Mary probably stands on the site of the Saxon minster. The first certain mention of it dates from 1179 (VCH 1962). The church was rebuilt in 1828–9 but incorporates a west tower said to have been the work of Inigo Jones in 1631 (*ibid.*).

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The town at Kingston, like those at Chertsey and Staines, was established in an area of gravel islands surrounded by river channels and the marshy alluvial floodplain. The central island lay between the course of the Thames to the west, two branches of the river Hogsmill to the south and east, and the Downhall/Latchmere channel to the north. To the south lay a series of smaller gravel islands running parallel with the course of the Thames. During the late Saxon period, Kingston was a royal estate centre that became a meeting place between the kings of Wessex and the archbishops of Canterbury, while the late Saxon kings were crowned here during the 10th century. The parish church of All Saints is probably to be identified with the late Saxon minster. The church is mentioned in Domesday Book and had residual rights over dependent chapels in the 12th century. Evidence for drainage ditches and plot boundaries of the late Saxon period has been recovered on the central island. In 1086, the estate was still royal demesne land with a population of more than 100 families, 30 ploughs, fisheries and five mills. It is likely that there would have been a concentration of settlement at Kingston itself, and the royal estate centre was probably located around the church (Phillpotts 2003, 2). Excavations of river revetments at Charter Quay on the Thames frontage recovered substantial timbers, including an almost complete wall plate that had been re-used from dismantled buildings. Dendrochronological analysis of one of the timbers identified the felling date as *c* 1120 (Andrews 2003, 175), providing a rare insight in to the nature of the settlement here prior to the reorganisation accompanying the laying out of the town. The foundation of Kingston's prosperity and growth in the 12th century was the wooden bridge constructed to cross the Thames a short distance downstream from the position of the present bridge, at the north-west corner of the original market area. This was the first bridge across the Thames above London. Excavated evidence has indicated that its earliest form dated to *c* 1170 (Potter 1988, 140). The costs of maintaining the bridge were supported by the rents of an endowment of property in the medieval town, controlled by the Bridge Wardens. The core of the town was probably laid out on the central island in the 12th century, and the excavations at Charter Quay have dated the establishment of the present Market Place to the middle of the 12th century (Andrews 2003, 173). Kingston had no formal defences, but the surrounding watercourses effectively marked its boundaries and may have provided some protection.

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*New towns of the 13th century*

Lechlade is recorded in Domesday Book as an estate of 15 hides belonging to Henry de Ferrers, with 53 recorded inhabitants (VCH 1981, 106–117). In 1210, Isabel de Mortimer obtained a grant of a market and an annual St Lawrence's Day fair; Lechlade was referred to as her new market town *c* 1230 (ibid., 107). St John's Bridge carried the main road between Gloucester and London across the Thames and had been built by 1228 about 1km east of the town. Isabel and her second husband Peter fitz Herbert founded the Hospital of St John the Baptist around 1228 and a second fair was granted to the hospital in 1234 (ibid.). The hospital was located outside the town to the south-east, near to St John's Bridge, and was responsible for its maintenance. The hospital was under the charge of a Prior and six other Augustinian priests, with several lay brothers and sisters to administer to the sick and the poor. The parish church of St Lawrence at Lechlade is first referred to in 1254, although it is likely that it existed before this time. It is suggested that it may have been founded, with a dedication to St Lawrence, around the time that the St Lawrence's Day fair was granted in 1210 (ibid., 118). The settlement was developed around the junction of the main east–west route and a salt way running from Droitwich through Burford. This route was marked by the High Street and St John's Street and is likely to have been altered to follow its present course at the time the borough was laid out. The church and market place stand at the junction of the north–south and east–west routes (Burford Street and High Street), and market stalls may have been set up in the churchyard, which is directly east of the market place and was probably originally larger. The burgages of the early 13th-century borough were laid out along the High Street, Burford Street and St John's Street, and medieval settlement is likely to have extended around Sherborne Street and along Burford Street towards Oak Street (Douthwaite and Devine 1998). A path leads across the watermeadows to the hospital and bridge, but was probably impassable during wet weather. The medieval manor house is thought to have been located to the west of the town in All Court Field, but it seems to have been demolished in the 15th century. A number of small lanes run south from the High Street to wharfs on the banks of the Thames. The most important of these is Bell Lane. Although the wharves were a significant feature of the post-medieval town, it is thought that many are likely to be medieval in origin.

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Maidenhead was the final successful new town to be established in the study region (Astill 1978; VCH 1923). It was established at the boundary between the two royal manors of Cookham and Bray, on the site of an earlier small settlement known as Ellintone, which appears in Domesday Book. The development of Maidenhead is associated with the creation of a new bridge across the Thames, which superseded earlier crossings at Cookham and Bray and became the main medieval crossing of the Thames for east–west traffic. The first reference to the bridge dates from *c* 1280, although it was presumably constructed earlier than this as the chapel of St Andrew and St Mary was built *c* 1263–74 in the middle of the High Street. Throughout the medieval period the inhabitants of the town remained subject to the jurisdiction of the parent royal manors, and there is no record of burgage tenure or other borough privileges, nor of any market or fair. Nevertheless, the chapel and bridge became a focus of collective activity. The original medieval settlement appears to have extended for approximately 550m west of Chapel Arches along both sides of the High Street, but did not extend over the lower ground towards the bridge. Astill (1978) suggests that traces of a back lane behind the tenements both north and south of the High Street would indicate that this was the location of the original planned settlement.

#### ***Failed promotions***

At the start of the 13th century, the Bishop of Winchester held the estate of Wargrave. The bishops founded several new towns on their estates during the 13th century, including the successful plantations of Witney and Farnham and the failed attempt at Newtown in Burghclere. In 1218, the Bishop of Winchester obtained from Henry III a charter for a Monday market at Wargrave and in 1225 Wargrave is recorded as a borough and the centre of a hundred, with its own bailiffs and jurors. However, there is no record of a market after the 13th century and no subsequent records provide any hint of an urban community. There is, nevertheless, some topographical evidence for an attempted plantation. The parish church stands somewhat isolated to the west of the present village, and may reflect the location of the earlier settlement. Access to the church is now gained from the south-east, but it is likely that it would have been earlier approached from the north-east, from the now-curtailed Church Street, which was perhaps the main street of the early village. Church Street is now

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only a minor road, crossing the north–south alignment of High Street, the principal thoroughfare of the present village, and continuing eastwards towards Waltham St Lawrence. It is likely that the settlement was moved by the bishop to take advantage of the south bank through road linking Reading with Henley. There are indications of burgage plots with back lanes on both sides of the High Street to the north of the Church Street crossing, though there is no sign of any special provision for a market place. The tithe map shows the back lane on the east side of High Street continuing northwards well beyond the occupied burgage plots, and this may indicate an intention to lay out a further planned area which was never settled. Wargrave's failure to develop further may be due to its relative proximity to Henley, some three miles away, which had the greater momentum (Astill 1978, 95–9).

In 1215, Eynsham Abbey created a new borough at Eynsham, which came to be known as Newland. The charter granted to the *communa* of all prospective tenants stated that all the abbey's demesne between the town and the Cassington road, and a strip of land half a furlong deep north of the road, was assigned for division into plots to be held by burgage tenure. The new borough had its own court and officers and remained a separate manor until the 20th century (VCH 1990, 106). It is suggested that the width of Newland Street implies it was intended for the site of a market or fair, and the northern boundary was marked by a back lane (*ibid.*, 106–7). A survey of 1366 shows the area divided into 27 holdings, mostly divided into a house or cottage on the street frontage with a larger close behind (*ibid.*, 107). By this time, however, the new borough had failed to become established, and holdings were being granted as ordinary freeholds (see below).

## THE CHARACTER OF MEDIEVAL TOWNS IN THE THAMES VALLEY

### **Population and the urban hierarchy**

In the 13th and 14th centuries, Oxford was the only major town in the Thames Valley above London. Its assessed wealth for the subsidy of 1334 was £914, placing it 8th in value amongst the towns of England, and its population in 1377 might be estimated as 4,000 or more based on the 2,347 adults who were assessed for the Poll Tax (Dyer 2000, tables 4 and 5). At the time of the Hundred Rolls Survey a century earlier, there had been around 1000 houses and



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cottages in the town and its suburbs. The other towns of the region can be divided into two broad groups, comprising larger towns with populations of 1000 or more, and smaller towns with populations of 300–500 or so. Some towns can be placed in the former category with reasonable confidence. Reading was assessed at £293 in 1334, and the 800 or so townspeople assessed for tax in 1381 might suggest a population of perhaps 1500. Cirencester was assessed at £250 in 1334 and its population may have been around the same size as Reading, based on *c* 746 poll tax payers in 1381. Abingdon (£269) and Kingston (£211) also appear among the 100 wealthiest towns in England in 1334, although they do not appear among the largest towns paying the poll taxes of 1377 and 1381 (Dyer 2000, table 5), which suggests that their populations may have dropped below 1000. Henley had 200–300 houses and a population of 1000–1500 by 1300. By 1377, the population is likely to have been around 670–800 living in 135–160 houses (VCH 2011b, 22). The population of Wallingford in 1334 has been estimated at around 1250 (Christie and Creighton 2013) and 200 burgesses are named at Marlow in the Hundred Rolls Survey of 1279, implying a population of perhaps up to 1000. Among the smaller towns, there is a record of 68 burgages at Fairford in 1307 and around 180 people were assessed for the poll tax in 1381, perhaps implying a population over 300. Lechlade seems always to have been slightly smaller, with around 138 assessed in 1381 from a total population under 300. At Eynsham, 211 adults were assessed for the poll tax in 1377, suggesting a population of no more than 400, while at Bampton the population is estimated at some 120 households in 1279 and 367 people paid the poll tax in 1377.

The status of a town was reflected by the scale of its trade, and there was a clear hierarchy of markets and fairs. London was the outstanding centre of regional, national and international trade. The larger provincial towns, particularly Oxford, were involved in redistributing imported goods as well as having a regional trade in goods such as corn, livestock, hides and fish. At least one or two intermediate ranks of market towns can be recognised before coming down to the lowest level of local markets (including village markets) trading only in perishable commodities such as eggs, vegetables and fruit which did not travel well over longer distances. Disputes between neighbouring market towns sometimes drew a distinction between rights to a ‘full market’ where ‘greater wares’ could be sold, and a ‘local market’ where only ‘small wares’ could be sold.

Rivalries between neighbouring market towns competing to maintain and enlarge their own market hinterland were sometimes expressed through complaints about new

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markets, or markets held on too large a scale. Around 1160, the men of Oxford and Wallingford, then still both in the upper tier of urban centres, complained that the market at Abingdon was being held on too large a scale and threatened their trade. In response, Henry II prohibited the sale of anything except ‘small wares’ at Abingdon until his return from Normandy. During his absence, the constable of Wallingford took matters into his own hands and sent in a gang to break up the Abingdon market by force. They were driven off and the men of Abingdon then complained to the king about this action. At the ensuing inquiry, 24 Berkshire men asserted that Abingdon had always had a market of the fullest type for all sorts of wares going back to Henry I’s reign. A counterclaim was then made that the witnesses were all men of the Abbot of Abingdon and that the court’s verdict was therefore false. A new inquiry was then ordered, at which men of Wallingford swore that in Henry I’s time nothing had been sold at Abingdon market other than bread and ale. However, the men of Oxford conceded that a wider range of goods had been sold there, but continued to insist that it was not a full market with goods brought in by carts and boats. Eventually the dispute was ended by the king’s justiciar, the 60-year-old Robert Beaumont, Earl of Leicester, who swore that he had himself witnessed a full market in operation at Abingdon as far back as William Rufus’ time (Abingdon Chron., ii, 227–9; Salzman 1931, 136–7).

Individual towns could rise and fall within the hierarchy. While Oxford retained its place as a regional centre despite periods of economic difficulty, Wallingford was on the slide. By the middle of the 13th century it had been replaced by the new town of Henley-on-Thames as the principal market and transshipment point of the middle Thames.

### ***Oxford***

Oxford was one of the leading towns in the country until well into the 14th century (VCH 1979). In the late 12th and early 13th century, its tallage contributions were based largely on the value of its trade in wool and cloth. In 1227, it paid at the same level as York and more than any other town in the country except London. Oxford merchants dealing in cloth and wine are frequently mentioned up to the middle of the 14th century and the town had strong trading contacts with London. Foreign merchants came to Oxford regularly, and there had been a Jewish community in the town since 1141. The Jewish community was fairly small,

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perhaps numbering some 200 people, but among them were some of the wealthiest in England. Cloth and leather were important in the town's economy and guilds of weavers and corvisers are mentioned as early as 1135. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Oxford supplied cloth to the king and cordwainers and tanners are recorded regularly in the town. The development of the university at Oxford was underway in the later 12th century and it acquired significant powers within the town under the terms of the settlement of 1214. By the early 14th century, it is estimated that the number of students in Oxford had reached its medieval peak of around 1500. Oxford's individual and institutional landlords profited from letting property for student lodgings and academic halls, but an increasing number of permanent foundations were appearing from the middle of the 13th century as sites were acquired for the foundation of colleges. The Dominican and Franciscan friars both established houses in Oxford in the 1220s. Apart from a Franciscan friary at Reading, Oxford was the only town in the present study area where medieval friaries were established. Oxford continued to play a significant role in national affairs until the end of the reign of Henry III with many recorded royal visits and councils. Parliament also met at the Dominican friary in St Ebbe's in 1258.

Perhaps the high-water mark of Oxford's prosperity can be seen in the rebuilding of its walls between 1226 and 1240, the only medieval walled circuit in the study region (Fig. 6). The walls appear to have followed the circuit of the late Saxon defences and still survive intact around the north-eastern sector where they were maintained within the grounds of New College. Here the wall stands to its full height with bastions, battlements and a wall-walk. This stretch was doubled by an outer wall around the north-east quarter of the town, it was the route taken by kings travelling to the royal palace of Beaumont and was perhaps intended to be visually impressive.

The establishment of new streets and lanes in the 12th century testifies to an intensification of occupation within the walled area, as plots were subdivided and backlands built up. Some of the more remote parts of the town were re-occupied by the end of the century, perhaps for the first time since the early 11th century. Merton Street, for example, in the south-east quarter, was built up from the late 12th century and several houses were acquired for the foundation of Merton College in the 1260s (Hassall 1971, 37). The south-west quarter of the town, St Ebbe's, seems to have been continuously occupied since the late Saxon period, with textile-, metal- and leather-working carried out in the area in the 12th and

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13th centuries (Hassall *et al.* 1989, 99–100). By the 13th century, the principal streets of the town were lined with frontage structures comprising cellars, rows of small shops at ground floor level and solars above, with dwelling houses comprising halls and chambers, detached kitchens and outbuildings behind (VCH 1979, 25). Haberdasher's Hall on the High Street, for example, was described in 1256 as a great stone house used as an academic hall. The property appears to have comprised a row of seven shops on the street frontage that were separately let, with a 'great solar' over them, and behind a hall with a solar and cellar at each end, a kitchen and a stable, all built in stone (*ibid.*).

The late 12th and early 13th centuries also saw the development of Oxford's suburbs. Occupation was established along the north side of the former town ditch in Broad Street, known in the 13th century as Horsemonger Street. During the 1280s, property at the west end of the street was being acquired for the new foundation of Balliol College, while excavations in 1937 at the east end found numerous medieval pits and wells, with pottery and glass dating from the 13th and 14th centuries (Bruce-Mitford 1939). Tenements were also established along both sides of St Giles, where excavations on the west frontage have recovered evidence of medieval tenements between the street and the boundary of the royal palace of Beaumont to the west (Andrews and Mephram 1997; Norton and Cockin 2008; OA 2009). St Giles may have been quite a prosperous street, as there is evidence of stone buildings at all three sites. The western suburb of St Thomas' was probably developed by Oseney Abbey around the time it founded the Church of St Thomas (Becket), in the late 12th century. Excavations have revealed a range of building types, with 13th-century stone, cob and timber structures all identified.

Oxford's southern suburbs lay along the Thames channels. Excavations have shown buildings lining the Grandpont in the late Saxon period, though there was a retrenchment of occupation in the area in the early Norman period. The very regular tenement layout evident on later maps suggests a phase of replanning in the late 12th or early 13th century, when there were also substantial repairs to the bridge. A phase of land reclamation datable to this period has been observed along the frontage of St Aldate's, followed by evidence of new building construction (Dodd 2003, appendix 1). Excavations on Brewer Street, immediately south of the town wall, have revealed a complex of buildings with associated drains, hearths, a possible tank and ovens. There were dyers working here in the 12th century and the later installations could be associated with this trade, or with tanning or brewing (*ibid.*).

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Holywell Manor remained separate from Oxford until the later 17th century when it became incorporated into the north-eastern side of the town. Domesday Book records the presence of 23 men with little gardens at Holywell, and in the 13th and 14th centuries most manor tenants were still cottagers, cultivating gardens of around half an acre adjoining their houses where they kept a few animals and grew cereals, vegetables and herbs (VCH 1979). Excavations at the junction of St Cross Road and Holywell Street revealed drainage ditches and gravel extraction pits dating to the late 12th–early 13th century, followed by building plots fronting St Cross Road from the early to mid-13th century and reverting to cultivation by the 15th century (Roberts 1995).

The Hundred Rolls Survey of 1279 (VCH 1979, 26) records 466 houses, 147 shops, 32 cottages and around 48 other properties (solars, cellars, taverns, schools) within the walled area and many others in the suburbs, with 62 houses on Grandpont, around 66 houses and 110 cottages in St Thomas's parish, and 177 houses, 28 cottages and 8 shops in Northgate Hundred (which includes St Giles). Suburb development was critical for accommodating Oxford's growing population. The recorded value of the properties indicates variation between different parts of Oxford, with the most expensive found in central parishes along the High Street and St John's parish around Merton Street. Concentrations of lower value property existed in St Ebbe's and St Peter le Bailey towards the castle, in St Mildred's and St Michael at the Northgate, and in the northern and western suburbs. Unsurprisingly, there is a clear link between the high value of town-centre property and the concentrations of shops in Cornmarket and along the High Street. The more important trades had defined areas for permanent shops in the centre of the town, with the drapery, cordwainery, skinnners, cobblers, lorimers, furriers and a mercery in Cornmarket, the spicery and goldsmiths' quarter on the High Street, the vintnery and a cooks' row in St Aldate's, where fish was also sold, and the butchers' shambles at the west end of the High Street. A cutlery and an armoury were recorded in 1298 but their location is unknown. The market was held twice a week, extending from the central crossroads into the streets around (ibid., 26–7).

#### ***The medium-sized towns***

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The monastic towns of Cirencester, Abingdon and Reading were successful marketing centres with strong links to the wool and cloth trades. By the early 14th century, Cirencester had become ‘a highly lucrative centre of the European wool trade, a position it still occupied two hundred years later’ (Rollison 2011, 36). With a hinterland of about 100 villages and market towns (including Fairford and Lechlade) it was the gathering spot for the local wool trade. By the early 14th century, dyeing and cloth finishing had become increasingly important (ibid., 35–7). It remained firmly under control of the abbey, which had bought the royal manor, including the town and the market, from Richard I and considered all the inhabitants to be its manorial tenants. Severe financial difficulties in the early 14th century seem to have led to the abbey increasing its control over the town by buying up ‘every house, shop, stall, field, farmstead, wood or other resource at or near Cirencester that came onto the market’ (ibid., 28). The markets were held twice-weekly and there were regular fairs. Visitors (presumably merchants) are recorded coming from London, Bristol, Southampton, Flanders and as far as Florence. The goods varied widely and included a range of textiles, dairy, honey, livestock, fish, cereals, wine and ale, coal and wood-faggots, hides, and metals, both raw and manufactured.

Abingdon developed rapidly from the 12th century, remaining very much under the control of its abbey. The substantial foundations of a probable river wall and 12th-century wharf were excavated at the Old Gaol on the north bank of the Thames (Parrington 1975; Thomas 2010). By the middle of the 13th century Abingdon, like Cirencester, had become an important regional centre for wool and cloth, with five annual fairs; its week-long St Mary’s Fair was one of the most important wool and cloth fairs of southern England (Jackson 2002). The 14th-century market house, which is likely to have been a replacement for an older one, contained stalls for the market and probably a court room above. It was burnt down in the riots of 1327 and was probably replaced by the ‘fair house with open pillars coverid with a rofe of leade for market folkes’ described by Leland. Within the town boundaries, evidence for the establishment and spread of occupied tenements in the late 12th and 13th centuries have come from both sides of West St Helen Street (Brady *et al.* 2007; Miles 1975) and from Lombard Street (SMA 1983, 113), where sherds of imported medieval glassware hint at a wealthy occupant. Excavations south of the Market Place and behind Twickenham House on East St Helen Street found evidence for intensive reoccupation beginning in the 12th and 13th



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centuries, with domestic pits and the robbing and re-use of stone from much earlier Roman walls (Wilson and Wallis 1991).

Excavations have also revealed evidence for expansion beyond Abingdon's town boundaries. Medieval stone buildings with an associated cobbled yard that can probably be associated with the medieval Vicarage of St Helen's were located immediately outside the town ditch. Part of a glazed-tile floor surface, a stone-lined garderobe, a fragment of stone window arch and a cellared room, together with the substantial nature of the surviving wall foundations, suggests a complex of some status built in the late 12th to 13th century. Abingdon's chief medieval suburb developed along Ock Street, which led into the town from the west. Evidence of tanning and associated trades such as horn working and possibly glue-making have been recovered in recent excavations on properties south of Ock Street, just beyond the town ditches and with easy access to water in the River Ock (Anthony *et al.*, 2006, 40–84; Brady *et al.* 2007). Excavations on the north side of the street found stone foundations of two buildings probably dating around the early 13th century, one possibly entirely masonry built. North of the town defences, excavations in Broad Street found numerous of pits and a stone-lined cess pit dating from the 12th to the 14th century (Parrington and Balkwill 1975).

The most comprehensive redevelopment took place at Reading, where Henry I's new abbey began to develop its borough from the late 12th century, when documentary evidence suggests a new market place was created outside the abbey gate (see Fig. 2). A new access into the town leading directly into this market place was created with the building of a bridge over the Kennet and the laying out of London Street with rented tenements on both sides. Broad Street and Friar Street are likely to have been laid out at around the same time as a small grid with interconnecting lanes (Astill 1978, 77–8). The suburban parish church of St Giles is also first documented at this time, suggesting that occupation was spreading into the area south of the Kennet. Archaeological evidence from excavations at 90–93 Broad Street suggests that the first boundary of St Mary's churchyard may have been established around the late 12th century, along with the establishment of properties aligned with Chain Lane to the east (Norton and Poore 2007, 2–3). Excavations on Broad Street, Friar Street and Castle Street also provide evidence for the establishment of occupation along these frontages in the late 12th or early 13th century (Ford *et al.* 2013, 284). A wharf existed on the Kennet south of the abbey precinct by the late 12th century, and there were at least three mills (the Abbey

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Mill, the Minster Mill and St Giles's Mill) on the channels that ran across the Kennet floodplain. Reclamation of the floodplain was underway in the late 12th century, with the laying out of lanes for access to tanning pits and workshops. A tenter-yard on the floodplain is mentioned in documentary sources in the early 13th century. By the late 13th century there was a fulling mill at St Giles and excavations here uncovered the remains of a complete rebuild of the mill in the early 14th century, which might be a sign of substantial investment in cloth manufacturing (*ibid.*, 289) (Fig. 7). The establishment of a Franciscan friary in the town in 1233 is a good indicator that Reading was by that time a relatively populous and increasingly significant urban centre in the Thames Valley.

If Cirencester, Abingdon and Reading were dominated by abbeys, Windsor and Wallingford developed in the shadow of royal power. Both hosted royal castles, but while the demands of the elite households provided a strong stimulus for economy, they also seem to have stifled their development. Windsor was established outside the castle boundary around 1135, with the parish church of St John probably built at the same time. The earliest street layout is very similar to that of the monastic towns, with two principal streets, Thames Street and Peascod Street, leading into the market place outside the castle gate. Lewis (2015) suggests that the growth of this small settlement into a viable commercial centre is likely to date around 1173 after the building of Windsor Bridge. This is supported by the results of the excavations at Jennings Yard, near the river, which found a probable stone-built, first-floor hall merchant's house over ground-floor warehousing, dating from the last quarter of the 12th century (Hawkes and Heaton 1993). New Street (known as River Street *c* 1235) provided a link from Thames Street to the town wharf and a small excavation in 2002 to the north of the castle, to the rear of No. 29 Thames Street, found evidence for the infilling and reclamation of a river channel and the raising of the land for occupation around the middle of the 13th century.

From *c* 1230, Henry III began a substantial upgrading of Windsor Castle including a major remodelling of the lower ward. During the 1240s and 1250s, the building of the new curtain wall and barbican at the west end of the castle led to the removal of properties along Thames Street and at the north end of the market place. Henry III compensated the borough for the destruction and the former occupants were rehoused, perhaps around Peascod Street which was expanded towards Clewer by the middle of the 13th century. The sharply curved and angled arrangement of the plot boundaries along the southern side of the road indicates

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that they had been laid out over the northernmost furlongs of Worth Field. Limited expansion had also begun south of the market place along Sheet Street and Moor Street. The market was quite severely constrained by the expanding castle to the north and the parish church to the south, and pressure on space here may be reflected in encroachments and the erection of permanent stalls in the 13th century. In the 14th century, references to Le Bochery, Fish Street and Drapery Row indicate the segregation of trades into specific locations. The churchyard seems to have expanded southwards, possibly to compensate for a lack of space to the north. A small excavation just south of the church, in an area believed to have been part of the original market-place, revealed numerous pits containing rubbish from a high-status household with evidence for the consumption of fallow deer venison, rabbits and grapes (Taylor and Preston 2005). By the later 13th century, the area had been taken into the churchyard and human burials began to be dug in the area where there were previously pits. Monarchs tended to compensate townspeople for successive property encroachments, and in 1277 Edward I granted a charter separating the town from the manor and constituting it as a free borough with a merchant gild.

The other town in the region with a major royal castle was Wallingford. Christie and Creighton (2013, 294) suggest that it may still have had a population of 1700–2000 in 1235, which was far fewer than Oxford but probably similar to other large towns in the region. The castle had seen a major expansion phase under Richard, Earl of Cornwall, around the middle of the 13th century when the northern road into the town was diverted and the North Gate re-sited to permit the expansion of the castle into a ‘concentric show-fortress’ (ibid., 298). There was significant investment in the route into the town over the river, with the rebuilding of the bridge in stone by the late 13th century. Wallingford’s gates were all masonry-built, but the ramparts were never replaced with stone walls (ibid., 399). There are numerous indicators that Wallingford’s economy was thriving well into the 13th century. Records of merchants from outside Wallingford paying for the right to trade in the town suggests that it commanded a sizeable commercial hinterland (ibid., fig. 8.1). There was a Jewish presence in the town as well as French traders that were still active in the 1220s. Among the occupations recorded in the early 13th century were weavers, blanket makers, dyers, fullers and tenterers (suggesting a cloth industry), as well as an ‘impressive mercantile element’ including vintners, mercers, grocers and drapers, and trades catering to the elite, including a glazier, a plumber and a group of goldsmiths. Wallingford’s fairs, however, were not attracting merchants from long

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distances (ibid., 298). By the early 14th century, there are signs of substantial decline and the population may have fallen to around 1250 by 1334 when Wallingford paid only £10 in subsidy. Archaeological excavations show no signs of suburban development to the north and west of the town, and several small-scale excavations in the interior suggest some retrenchment from the 13th century onwards. After the death of Richard, Earl of Cornwall, in 1272 Wallingford was no longer the administrative centre of the earldom, and the castle became used increasingly for pleasure, as a centre for hunting, hawking and tournaments. This may have contributed to a downturn in Wallingford's fortunes in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, and it is suggested that the occupational structure of the town in the early 13th century may have been distorted by elite demand from the royal castle (ibid.). The decline in elite patronage may have coincided with competition in Wallingford's hinterland. Oxford and Reading had become the regional centres, while Abingdon had expanded as a centre of cloth manufacturing. Grants of markets to surrounding villages may have reduced demand for Wallingford's facilities, while the spread of clothmaking in the countryside affected Wallingford and Oxford.

#### ***Riverside towns of the Middle Thames***

The 13th and 14th centuries witnessed the expansion of the Middle Thames riverside towns, whose prosperity was closely linked to their role as gathering places and trans-shipment points for the London river-trade, and as places where long-distance routes crossed the Thames. Henley became the effective head for much of the primary navigation by the late 13th century, associated with the supply of grain and firewood to the capital. Above Henley, the rising costs of transportation on more difficult stretches of the river discouraged regular trade and Peberdy has suggested there was increasingly only a secondary navigation catering to local demand (see *The River Thames* chapter, this volume). Henley had its own fair by the beginning of the 13th century and a gild merchant by the 1260s. Its central area expanded along Bell Street, Duke Street, the south side of New Street, and Friday Street, which may have originated as an unplanned squatter settlement. The final stage in the building of the medieval town occurred in the 14th century, when the southern half of the manor site fell into disuse. This provided an opportunity for the laying out of a series of four-perch properties

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running back to the edge of the vacant manorial garden. By the 14th century, the waterfront was lined with granaries, several of which were held by London cornmongers and fishmongers who controlled this trade. Goods brought into Henley on return trips included salt, wine, fish (especially herrings) and household wares (VCH 2011b, 78–9). Henley also had a typical range of crafts and trades for a medium-sized town, including metalworkers, clothmakers, woodworkers and leatherworkers, as well as a goldsmith, two potters and a tiler (ibid.).

Marlow's market and two fairs are referred to in the 13th and 14th centuries. A timber market house is recorded at the north end of the High Street, but it was replaced by 1807 and its exact location is unknown (Green and Beckley 2014, 33). The Hundred Rolls Survey of 1279 names some 200 burgesses of the town, implying a population of up to 1000 (ibid., 32). Richard the dyer is mentioned in 1241 living in the town and selling his cloth on the market. However, it is suggested that Marlow's chief source of prosperity lay in its river trade. Wharves are thought to have been located at the south end of the High Street and cargoes included grain, timber and livestock. There is a record from 1218 of 14,000 bundles of firewood being sent from West Wycombe to Southwark via Marlow, and further records from the post-medieval period suggest that timber and firewood from the Chilterns were the principal goods shipped from Marlow and wharfs at Hedsor, Bourne End and Spade Oak. The chantry of St Mary had been formed by the burgesses of the town by 1394, and possibly earlier. The Hospital of St Thomas is recorded in the 14th century and gave its name to Spittal Street, though its exact location is unknown. Two medieval buildings in Marlow date from the 14th century: No. 24 High Street, which survives as a jettied building and the Old Parsonage in St Peter's Street (ibid., 17, 37).

Staines' success as a river crossing is likely to have drawn trade and traffic away from nearby Chertsey, which was one of the poorest of Surrey's towns by the 14th century (Poulton 1998, 8; O'Connell 1977, 11). The town seems to have been occupied by buildings extending along both sides of the High Street (Jones 2010, 35). Excavations revealed numerous boundary ditches suggesting that properties might originally have been some 16m wide and subsequently sub-divided, and there is evidence of at least one lane (Penny Lane) extending from the High Street to the water's edge with buildings on both sides (ibid.). Excavations have shown that the High Street was lined with timber-framed, clay-floored buildings with rear yards containing pits, latrines and wells (ibid.). Excavations close to the

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edge of the town 'island' (site J&C) exposed a rectangular building parallel to the old river bank. The building had numerous close-set ground beams which suggest that it may have been a warehouse (ibid., fig. 4.22). Excavations behind Nos 76–88 at the east end of the High Street (site PS) found an area of postholes cut through a trampled surface close to the street frontage, possibly a tethering ground for animals being brought to market (ibid., 35–6). The general expansion of the town spread beyond the 'island', with evidence of a sizeable population around the church at Binbury and tenements along London Road, which may have been facilitated by access improvements between the islands (ibid., 45).

The citizens of Kingston obtained a borough charter and market from King John in 1200 and most property plots were held by burgage tenure. By this time, much of the land around the Market Place was fully occupied by houses, shops and workshops, with the land behind used as wharfage. The earliest plots identified here in the Charter Quay excavations seem to have been about 10–12m across (Andrews 2003, 175). Expansion of the occupied area through land reclamation of the river channels was underway by the early 13th century along the east side of a channel of the Hogsmill, which was later to become completely built over (ibid., 173). Nevertheless, the development of the town was also accompanied by repeated episodes of flooding, which may have been exacerbated by the building of the bridge. In the middle of the 13th century, the 'Creek' at the south end of the market was still considered to mark the boundary of the town, but a small suburb was in existence here along the road to Guildford by 1290, possibly as early as the late 12th century (ibid., 174). The suburb was accessed from the market place by the Clattering Bridge; it was known as *Clateringbrugende* in the 1290s and *Westbitamestrete* by 1314. Trades and occupations on the west side of the Market Place and in the suburb during the 13th century include fishmongers, a charcoal supplier, a potter and a silversmith or goldsmith, with Simon le Merchaunt, a chandler and butchers recorded in the suburb. Taverns are mentioned as early as 1317 and were probably located on the west side of the market. Kingston was a major pottery producing centre from the mid-13th to the mid-14th century, well known for a range of highly decorated jugs, and several 14th-century kilns have been found in the town around Eden Street, Union Street and the London Road. There seems to have been a focus of industrial activity, including potting and tanning, on the eastern and south-eastern outskirts of the town, while the market area and river frontage supported trade. Suburban development was also taking place near London Road by the late 13th to 14th centuries. A castle is



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mentioned in 1263–5, but its location is unknown and it may have been a short-lived structure used to defend the bridgehead during the civil conflicts at the time.

#### *The small towns of the Upper Thames*

The small towns of the Upper Thames were relatively early foundations, and all but Lechlade were established by the early 12th century. Few signs of development are known from the 13th century, and evidence suggests that while each had attained a modest level of prosperity they remained closely linked to their agricultural hinterland. In Cricklade, the only town on the south bank of the Thames, Town Bridge was constructed over the possible artificial Thames channel north of the defences by 1225 and the Hospital of St John the Baptist was built near this bridge during the 1220s (VCH 2011a 18, 23, 25). A three-day fair was granted in 1257 and the town was described in 1273 as a *villa mercatoria* (ibid., 43–4). Despite its origins as a royal fortification, Cricklade was never self-governing in the medieval period, and the various rights and profits of lordship had come to be known as Cricklade Manor by the mid-13th century, with a manor court that functioned as a borough court. The ‘manor’ was held by the Crown and frequently granted out. The main north-south street of the town is recorded as the ‘great street’ *c* 1270 and while no doubt shops and houses extended along its length, two farmsteads were located within the enclosed area at Abingdon Court and at Parsonage Farm. Generally, however, relatively little agricultural land was being worked within the town though the burgesses enjoyed the considerable benefit of 108 acres of common meadow near the Thames (ibid., 23, 25, 42). By the 14th century, there was a market cross, later removed to St Sampson’s churchyard (Fig. 8). Wine sellers and possibly a goldsmith are recorded in the town in the 13th century, and Cricklade’s merchants bought goods in Flanders and exported wool through London in the late 13th and early 14th centuries (VCH 2011a, 23). Surnames suggest that there were weavers, fullers, dyers, bleachers and cutters in the town, and there were three smithies in the High Street in 1280–1.

Fairford was a small town but one that prospered from the wool trade, and its inhabitants were closely connected to the extensive agricultural interests of the manor (VCH 1981, 78–115). The bridge carrying the Cirencester-to-London road over the River Coln was built by the late 12th century, presumably replacing the earlier ford, and Leland recorded four

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stone arches here in the 1540s. Fairford had an established corn market by the 1260s, the lord of the manor was holding a market and fair in 1287, and there was a fulling mill in 1296. By 1307, there were 68 burgages and 20 years later, the inhabitants included a baker, a chapman, a skinner, a smith and a woolmonger, while two of the wealthiest were possibly merchants. Lechlade seems to have been rather smaller and less wealthy than Fairford. A total of 59 inhabitants were assessed for the Lay Subsidy in 1327 and around 138 for the Poll Tax of 1381. In 1287, there were two inhabitants selling wine, and a Henry Woolmonger was trading in the town in the late 13th century. In 1327, surnames include smith, tanner and tailor.

The population of Bampton and its subsidiary township of Weald is estimated at around 120 households by 1279, and in 1377 367 inhabitants paid the Poll Tax (VCH 1996, 11), although many of these people are likely to have been agricultural tenants of the various manors. The town seems to have been replanned in the 12th or 13th century and a large triangular market place was created south-east of the old enclosure around the church. This may have occurred when a new grant for a Wednesday market and an annual fair was obtained in 1241 by Imbert Pugeys, then tenant of the royal manor. The creation of the market place seems to have involved the diversion of earlier routes along the line now followed by Broad Street, High Street and Bridge Street. The market tolls amounted to 40s a year in 1296, but this fell by 1362. Trade and industry are not well documented for Bampton, though there is some evidence for continued involvement in the Droitwich salt trade. A smith is mentioned in 1279, and in 1327 a spicer and tanner, and cottagers contributing significant amounts to 14th-century subsidies may have been craftsmen (*ibid.*, 39). Shops were mentioned in 1310 and 1420, while 14th-century surnames include cooper, carpenter and painter. In the post-medieval period, there is evidence for large-scale leatherworking in the town but it is not clear whether this had earlier origins. Bampton appears in royal itineraries up to the reign of Henry III, and seems to have retained the role it acquired in the late Anglo-Saxon period as a place where lands were held by royal and county officers. This, and its links with Exeter Cathedral, meant that it may have had a rather unusual character in the medieval period, with a significant level of high-status occupation despite its predominantly rural and agricultural character. An unusual number of high-status residences are associated with the different manorial holdings. Bampton Castle, later Ham Court, was built to the west of the town by Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, *c* 1315, and is likely to have succeeded an earlier manor house of Aymer's father, and an earlier royal manor house on the site or

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nearby (*ibid.*, 23; Fig. 9). The former manor house of the Exeter cathedral holding, now known as the Deanery, retains some fabric of the late 11th and 12th century and elements of a late 12th-century east range, although the building was later extensively remodelled in the late 16th or early 17th century (*ibid.*, 27; Fig. 10). The third chief manor at Bampton, originally held by Robert d'Oilly, stood on the site of the modern Folly House. The surviving building includes a possible medieval wall, and excavations in 1989 revealed a concentration of medieval features dated by 12th- and 13th-century pottery (SMA 1992, 56).

After the creation of a new borough at Eynsham in 1215, there were signs that the plantation had not been successful and by the end of the 13th century several new burgages were regranted as ordinary freeholds (VCH 1990, 104). Thereafter, the town ceased to expand to any great extent and remained dependent on agriculture, though it retained its market, borough institutions and a small trading community. The abbey's parish church of St Leonard was built at the abbey gate overlooking the market place. It is first recorded in the late 12th century, but the earliest surviving fabric is late 13th-century (Fig. 11). A wharf was established before the mid-13th century and remained in regular use throughout the medieval period (*ibid.*, 138). Only 211 adults were assessed for the Poll Tax in 1377, making Eynsham one of Oxfordshire's smallest towns. Nevertheless, the abbey continued to receive occasional royal visits. By the middle of the 14th century, there seems to have been encroachment on the market area by shops and butchers (*ibid.*, 105).

#### **The late medieval period**

Medieval expansion peaked by about 1300. It is commonly thought that urban decline set in after the Black Death of 1348–9 and growth only resumed once more in the later 16th century. However, this can be a misleading oversimplification. For example, the textile trade flourished in the late 14th century and migrants from the countryside moved in to spark a revival in the fortunes of many towns. This short-lived boom came to an end in the early 15th century and there was a widespread recession of trade during the 1440s and 1450s. The greatest potential for growth seems to have been in the middle ranking towns, as the balance of prosperity shifted with the decline in the rich wool-exporting towns of the east and the expansion of the textile industries in the west and south. The increasing dominance of

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London in the nation's mercantile and political life provided an additional stimulus to its surrounding region, including the towns of the present study area in the Middle Thames Valley. At the same time, the proliferation of towns and markets in the late 12th and 13th century increased competition, and many towns lost trade to new rivals. With a reduced population in the later medieval period, the land hunger of the 13th century was replaced by labour shortages. The incomes and conspicuous expenditure of wealthy landlords fell, while opportunities increased and standards of living rose for many in society's middle ranks, and the late medieval period saw better-off inhabitants taking an increasingly prominent role in urban life. One of the keys to urban success in the late medieval period seems to have been the ability to develop and exploit specialisation to meet demand for higher quality goods. Conversely, small places that had relied on supplying general marketing and craft services to a limited hinterland faced reduced demand from a smaller population, increasing competition from rivals, a shifting emphasis in agricultural production away from grain towards the pasturing of animals, and the rise of long-distance carrying services increasingly focused on the transport of provincial produce to the markets of London.

#### *Oxford*

Oxford was the region's only large town. However, its character changed significantly in the late medieval period with a marked decline in population and prosperity, perhaps from the later 13th century. Oseney Abbey was having difficulty collecting rents from its properties, with arrears accumulating and properties lying vacant (VCH 1979, 39–40). The onset of decline may be linked to changes in the organisation of the cloth industry, with a relocation of weaving to villages where labour was cheaper (*ibid.*). As with Wallingford, the growth of rival towns and markets in the county may have drawn local trade away, while long-distance trade suffered with the gradual decline of fairs. The building of Abingdon Bridge in 1416 may have been particularly significant in drawing long-distance trade from Gloucester and the Cotswolds away from Oxford, and by the middle of the 15th century the Thames may no longer have been navigable to the town, causing goods to be trans-shipped at Burcot. Oxford also lost its earlier political importance, as Edward I's stay in 1275 appears to be the last time that Beaumont Palace was used as a royal residence and it was granted to the Carmelite Friars

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in 1318 (*ibid.*, 14). In the long-term, however, perhaps the most significant change of all was the transfer of the assets of the town into the hands of its many religious houses. The university's economic influence was also increasing. In 1355, for example, the university gained complete control of the assize of ale and this seems to have led to brewing on a rota system, with the result that brewing changed from being a widespread domestic activity to a trade carried out on a commercial scale by a limited number of increasingly wealthy specialists (*ibid.*, 47). Over the course of the 14th century, there is a clear shift towards a service economy in the town, geared to supplying the needs of the university.

Oxford's economic decline and the effects of the famines and plagues of the 14th century meant that there was a marked retrenchment in occupation. By 1370, it was reported that even houses in the main streets were falling into disrepair and being demolished. In 1378, a jury had described the area north-east of the town wall 'a dump for filth and corpses and a resort of criminals and prostitutes', and a year later William of Wykeham obtained 51 vacant tenements and one house here for the foundation of New College (*ibid.*, 16, 29). There was also significant contraction in the south-east quarter of the town, where 35 late 13th-century tenements had been reduced and amalgamated to perhaps half that number by the mid-15th century, as well as in the southern and northern suburbs. George Street, outside the town wall to the north, became an area of waste ground called Broken Hayes (*ibid.*, 29). However, the retrenchment in domestic occupation offered opportunities for college founders and the university to begin the colonisation of the eastern part of the town that remains such a feature of Oxford's modern urban landscape. Merton College had initially acquired existing houses in Merton Street in the 1260s, but it rebuilt and expanded to take in much of the land south to the town wall between 1317 and 1412. The mid-13th-century foundation of University College was initially based in a small number of houses on the north side of the High Street, while Balliol and Durham colleges had been founded on land outside the walls north of Broad (Horsemonger) Street. During the 14th century, however, Queen's, Exeter, Oriel, University College, New College and Canterbury College obtained permanent sites in the eastern half of the town, followed in the 15th century by All Souls, Lincoln and Magdalen Hall (which later took over the buildings of St John's Hospital outside the Eastgate). The university began work on its first major building, the Divinity School and library at the north end of Schools Street (*ibid.*, 29; Fig. 12). The creation and expansion of college and university precincts and buildings has also affected Oxford's street plan, with numerous

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medieval lanes being diverted or closed-up altogether. Nevertheless, there is evidence that properties continued to be built and repaired regularly in the 14th and 15th centuries by major institutional landlords such as Oseney Abbey and the Hospital of St John (ibid., 33). The relatively poor artisan suburb of St Thomas's expanded in the early 15th century, and its growth at this time may reflect the loss of housing within the town walls to the expansion of the university. Most of the new houses of the period seem to have been timber framed, possibly on stone foundations, and from the 14th century there is evidence for extra floors being added, plus increasing mentions of chimneys.

#### ***The middle-ranking towns***

Reading appears to have been the region's most successful late medieval town. In the subsidies of 1524/5, 531 tax payers paid £223 (Dyer 2000, tables 6 and 7), which suggests that the population had approximately doubled to around 3000–3500. It included a significantly wealthy business community, which made it the 12th richest town in England and the richest, if not quite the largest, town in the Thames Valley above London. By contrast, the contributions of other Thames Valley towns were much lower, with Oxford paying £105, Windsor £94, Kingston £62, Cirencester £58, Abingdon £54 and Henley £41 (ibid., table 7). By the 15th century, Reading had become the chief town of Berkshire and its success in the late medieval period owed much to its clothmaking industry. The county was well suited to clothmaking, with easy access to London and Southampton, access to good-quality local wool, the fast-flowing Kennet providing water and power for fulling mills, a large rural industry in the North Berkshire villages for spinning, carding, weaving and fulling, and the skills and facilities for the dyeing and finishing of high-quality cloths in Reading and Newbury, from where cloth was distributed nationally and internationally (Jackson 1993). Although the town remained under the control of the abbey until 1538, a guildhall is mentioned in the early 13th century. Under the terms of a 1254 agreement with the abbot, the guild was sanctioned but the abbot retained the right to nominate its officers. Numerous late medieval references to the guildhall show that it stood on a floodplain island between channels of the Kennet and was accessed by a lane and a bridge. The guild owned other buildings in the area, including barns, cottages, stables and a common latrine in the 15th



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century. The major campaign of excavations carried out in Reading in advance of the construction of the Oracle Shopping Centre recovered evidence for the continuing use of the floodplain for tanning and the maintenance of the mills and revetted water channels, during the late 14th and 15th centuries. There was, however, no sign of the kind of major investments seen in the 13th and early 14th centuries, or those that came after the dissolution of the abbey in the mid-16th century (Ford *et al.* 2013, 291–2). There does seem to have been a marked retrenchment of the abbey. The cookshop was dismantled in the second half of the 15th century and the abbey's hospital and leper hospital had ceased to function. As at Cirencester and Abingdon (see below), the initiative was increasingly with the townspeople to found almshouses, and in Reading this was supported by money left by John Leche in 1477. Excavations have recovered some evidence for retrenchment of occupation. At the west end of Friar Street, the frontages of two house plots had been left vacant for a time in the 14th–15th centuries, and at Castle Street pits had been dug where a building had previously stood. It is notable, however, that these properties were relatively remote from the commercial centre of Reading, focused at the opposite end of the town around the abbey's market and wharfs. At 90–93 Broad Street, food remains from a late medieval cess pit included bones of rabbit, fallow deer, partridge and seabass, suggesting that some residents were enjoying a very comfortable standard of living (Norton and Poore 2007, 31). Despite the increasing numbers of inhabitants, the town did not expand into the surrounding countryside, suggesting that the increase must have been accommodated by the subdivision of existing properties (Astill 1978, 76, 78), and by the time of Roger Amyce's survey of 1552 there were many small properties crowded along the main street frontages (see Ford *et al.* 2013, plate 1.2).

Cirencester appears to be another example of a medium-sized town that profited throughout the late medieval period from its close connection with the wool trade and with clothmaking. The town's population appears to have increased from around 1500 to 2000–2500 by 1400, and that number was maintained until renewed expansion in the late 16th century (Rollison 2011, 38). During the 14th century, there is evidence for an increase in the number of weavers in the town, and the marked growth in population probably reflects Cirencester's attractions for rural migrants. The clothmaking expansion may have contributed to a decisive shift in the balance of power in the town in favour of the townspeople, and Rollison suggests that the abbots were never able to dominate clothmaking as they had

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formerly dominated the wool trade, because it grew up in the rural hinterland of the town and largely beyond their jurisdiction (*ibid.*, 83). Although the townspeople failed to establish a guild merchant in the face of relentless opposition from the abbey, the weavers' guild may have become the focus for collective action. From the late 14th century onwards, however, the townspeople were increasingly devoted to the parish church. In 1382, a combination of 'merchants, tradesmen and squires' transferred property to maintain a priest in the chapel of St Mary to pray for them in life and after death, and for the souls of their benefactors and others (*ibid.*, 86). The parish church was transformed by almost 130 years of continuous building. In the second decade of the 15th century, the spire was rebuilt and it overshadowed that of the adjacent abbey. In the period from 1516 to 1530, the nave was rebuilt as 'the tallest of any Cotswold church, perhaps of any Perpendicular church anywhere' (*ibid.*). Alongside this building work, donations and bequests funded the employment of priests, the provision of lights and singing (including the training of choir boys), scholarships to Oxford, sermons, poor relief and road maintenance leading to the town (*ibid.*, 78, 86). By 1500, the townspeople controlled everything in the parish church (except the high altar) and it became the focus of their collective identity.

Abingdon was also a significant centre for wool and cloth in the medieval period and it appears to have been exceptionally prosperous in the late 14th and early 15th century (Jackson 2002). However, clothmaking ultimately declined in the town, partly because unlike Newbury and Reading it had never developed specialised skills in the dyeing and finishing of high-quality cloth that was in demand. In the 16th century, malting and leatherworking overtook clothmaking as the town's most important industrial occupations (*ibid.*). An intensification in tanning and associated activities in the late medieval period have been identified from excavations in Ock Street, East and West St Helen Streets, and south of Market Place towards the Thames (eg Anthony *et al.*, 2006, 40–84; Brady *et al.* 2007). Abingdon continued to provide markets and services for a wealthy rural hinterland with significant trade in animals and grain, but appears to have been struggling by the early 16th century, when its population may have dropped below 1000 (Jackson 2002, 63–4). As at Cirencester, the abbey's control of the town remained strong and the aspirations of the townspeople were channelled through their religious guilds based at the parish church of St Helen. The Guild of Our Lady was formed in the 1240s and built a Lady Chapel on the south side of the nave around 1250 (Cox 1989, 37). A second guild, the Fraternity of the Holy

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Cross, was founded at the church in the late 14th century. A new nave and new aisle were added and the Lady Chapel was given a fine painted ceiling around 1391 (*ibid.*, 70–2). The prosperity of Abingdon in the late 14th and early 15th century is reflected in the work of the Fraternity, which undertook the building of the bridges and causeway across the Thames south of the town in 1416–17. A fourth aisle was added to St Helen's by 1420 and an almshouse was established in 1446 for 13 poor men and women (Fig. 13). Around this time, the Fraternity is likely to have been responsible for the building of Abingdon's market cross, now lost but recorded in the early 17th century. It was set up in the market square, outside the abbey gate, as a very visible reminder to the abbot of the Fraternity's wealth and influence (Cox 1989, 85). Archaeological evidence suggests there may have been some retrenchment in occupation in the town in the late medieval period. At Broad Street, the remains of robbed-out stone buildings may have been from 'Goodlucks Farm', documented as having been built in the area in the 15th or 16th century, and this can be associated with the accumulation of agricultural or horticultural soils in the area formerly used for digging domestic rubbish pits (Parrington 1975, 16–7). The absence of late medieval pottery at 83–88 Ock Street suggests that several late 12th/13th-century houses may have been demolished and turned over to one of the many gardens and orchards in the area (Roberts 1997). Nonetheless, the principal streets appear to have remained built up and Abingdon has several surviving 15th- and early 16th-century houses.

Unlike Wallingford, late medieval Windsor benefited from continuing royal investment. Across the river at Eton, Henry VI's college was under construction intermittently from the 1440s to the 1520s, and Edward IV initiated the rebuilding of St George's Chapel in the castle in 1475. After his murder, Henry VI was initially buried at Chertsey Abbey but his body was transferred to St George's Chapel by Richard III, where it became the focus of a cult that was assiduously promoted by his Lancastrian successor, Henry VII (Lewis 2015). The tomb attracted large numbers of pilgrims, making a considerable contribution to the prosperity of the town in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, by which time it was among the 30 richest towns in the country. The townspeople had a substantial timber-framed guildhall since 1369 (demolished in 1733), and recorded medieval inns include The Bell and The George. However, royal ambitions had some negative impacts, such as the loss of the town's common fields for the creation of Edward IV's deer park (now Little Park) from 1461. Nonetheless, Windsor faced the same problems

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as Wallingford. From the reign of Henry VIII, the castle fell from favour as a royal residence, and, apart from a brief revival under Charles II, was mostly abandoned until its medieval associations brought it back into royal favour in the early 19th century. Without the castle and the royal household, Windsor entered a long period of stagnation and its inhabitants numbered just over 3000 by 1801, after recording a population of *c* 2500 in 1524/5 (*ibid.*).

#### ***Riverside towns of the Middle Thames***

A declining population in the capital following the Black Death seems to have led to the withdrawal of London merchants from Henley. Grain and wood continued to be sent downriver, but by the 1350s local merchants seem to have replaced the Londoners as exporters of the agricultural produce from the town's hinterland (VCH 2011b, 80). By the 1390s, there are signs of an expanding cloth trade. Henley's population and economy contracted from the 1420s–30s, although the river trade continued, with a marked expansion in wool (*ibid.*, 80–1). The most important trader in the town by the 1440s was John Elmes, who may have come from Wiltshire. Elmes traded through Southampton, is known to have sold as many as 120 sacks of wool to an Italian merchant in 1456, and he appears to have supplied dyes and probably wool to the Reading cloth industry (*ibid.*, 82). Grain exports increased again in the late 15th century, although Henley did not regain its earlier prominence as one of London's main supply sources until the 1560s–70s (*ibid.*, 83). The Grade I listed Chantry House in Henley is a rare survival of what was probably a late 15th-century commercial building, though its origins may be earlier (List no. 1047033; Fig. 14).

As with many towns in the region, there were several substantial inns at Henley in the 15th century, with at least five in the town by 1440 (VCH 2011b, 81–2). Although Henley remained a seigneurial borough throughout the medieval period, legally subservient to the parent manor, it was largely administered by the guild in the later medieval period. By the early 15th century, there was a guild hall on the south side of Hart Street and the guild was responsible for the bridge and the church, law and order, administration of the market, street sanitation and the removal of nuisances. It had a significant income from the rents of around 115 houses in the town by the 1380s, and earned more from the town than the lord of the manor.

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Relatively little is known about the development of Maidenhead, but in 1352 a chantry with its own priest was established at the chapel of St Andrew and St Mary in the High Street, and a guild was licensed by Henry VI in 1451 to maintain the chantry and keep the bridge in good repair. From the 1450s onwards, numerous references to inns suggest that Maidenhead providing services to travellers using its bridge. The Bear, the Bull, the Lion and the Swan are all mentioned in 15th century records, their owners often accused of profiteering by charging excessive amounts for provisions.

Kingston prospered and expanded in the late medieval period (Andrews 2003, 176). Land reclamation from the Thames and the Hogsmill channel occurred in the 14th century, with revetments of this date found in excavations at Charter Quay and Kingston Bridge. New and larger timber-framed buildings on stone-and-tile foundations were built across an extensive area west of the Market Place during this period, and the yards behind were built up with workshops, stores and stables (*ibid.*). This area was known as le Hyerowe in the late medieval period when high buildings with jettied upper storeys are likely to have been built in the 14th century, and several sets of possible jetty posts are recorded in a rental of 1417. Some property subdivisions are attested as early as 1383 in town rentals, and some of the later alleyways from the market to the waterfront may have been established at this time. A series of pitched-tile hearths, archaeomagnetically dated to the last quarter of the 14th century, were identified on the northern part of the frontage of Westbitamestrete. No evidence of pottery production was identified and it is possible that the kilns were used for baking and/or malting. Several of Kingston's inns on the west side of the Market Place were probably established in the 15th century, including the Saracen's Head, established before 1417, and the George, which developed out of earlier tenements.

At Staines, archaeological evidence suggests a contraction of the town to the area around the bridge and market from the later 14th century (Jones 2010, 36). This period saw the formation of 'dark-earth' soils over most of the tenement yards south of the High Street and at some locations to the north. Suburban settlement along the London Road was abandoned and reverted to agricultural use until the 18th century, while occupation continued at the sites closer to the bridge and market (*ibid.*, 45). Late medieval industrial activity was found to the south of the market (site CS) and on the north side of the High Street (site GSS) in the form of iron-working hearths and chalk-lined wells dating to the late 14th and early 15th century (*ibid.*, 4, 187). There seems to have been a substantial revival in the late 15th or

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early 16th century, though not all the area of the former town was reoccupied. A new building was built next to the bridge approach-road in the late 15th century (MSS site), a new lane within aligning buildings was laid out perpendicular to the High Street across the southern part of the island around the same time (J&C site), and several of the iron-working hearths at site CS were rebuilt in the early 16th century. Evidence for another new building was also seen at the east end of the town (site PS). The structure, probably timber-framed, is of interest as it may have had one of the earliest brick-built chimneys in Staines (*ibid.*, 36–7).

#### ***Small towns of the Upper Thames Valley***

In the Upper Thames Valley above Oxford, several towns hosted families who had made their fortune in the wool trade, though it was in these settlements that late medieval retrenchment appears to have been strongest. Cricklade seems to have remained a relatively prosperous place in the late 14th century (VCH 2011a). Around 1378, there were still weavers in the town along with six glovers, a cooper, three bakers, nine butchers and 11 brewers. Shoemakers were present at least from the 15th century and a butchers' shambles is mentioned in 1442–3. However, from the mid-15th century there are signs of decline, as there was no further evidence for clothworkers in the town and the tolls from the Saturday market were worth very little. By the late 15th and early 16th century, the markets were worthless and the 3-day fair granted in 1257 was of no value by 1547 when may have been discontinued (*ibid.*, 44). No. 46 High Street is the only complete, surviving medieval building in Cricklade and probably dates from around 1500, although it was encased in coursed limestone in the early 17th century. Parsonage Farm was located in the south-west quarter of the town and consisted a large stone barn probably of late 15th- or early 16th-century date (*ibid.*, 25).

At Fairford, the recorded inhabitants in 1381 included several butchers, a cobbler, a tailor, a tanner, a tiler and a smith, two 'hostellers', shepherds and fishermen. Wool production was probably more important to Fairford's economy than clothmaking, although a fuller and a weaver were living in the town in the later 15th century (VCH 1981, 78). Guilds of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity are recorded in the late 1480s. There were, however, signs of decline in Fairford from this date, when there were not enough tenants for all the



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burgages. An apparent upturn in the town's fortunes that followed may be due to the Tame family, who were very successful wool producers and merchants, and it is suggested that the infilling of the market place may date from this late 15th-century revival (*ibid.*, 18, 75). The Tame family financed the re-building of St Mary's Church, which still includes its complete set of late medieval stained-glass windows designed by the King's glazier, Bernard Flower (Fig. 15), and they left bequests for the maintenance of the London-to-Cirencester road. Fairford may have been benefiting from the growth of the carrying trade from the 15th century onwards, as an inn is recorded in 1419 and there were at least three by 1563 (*ibid.*, 73). Although much of the old town was rebuilt from the late 18th century, the White Hart is probably 16th century or earlier, while the George and the Bull inns are also possibly (*ibid.*, 71).

Lechlade was of similar size and prosperity to Fairford. In 1381, 44 traders were assessed for the Poll Tax, including three merchants, two mercers, two tanners, a draper, a skinner, a weaver, a spicer and 15 brewers (*ibid.*, 115). Clothmaking was probably fairly important at Lechlade, as there were still six weavers in the town in 1608. Although the market was in decline in the late medieval period (*ibid.*, 117), the parish church of St Lawrence was rebuilt by 1470. The Hospital of St John the Baptist was impoverished by 1462. Its assets, along with the responsibility for the upkeep of the bridge, were transferred to a chantry in the parish church in 1472, followed by the suppression of the hospital in 1473. By the middle of the 16th century, the population was estimated at around 200 communicants and 65 households (*ibid.*, 110).

## **SUMMARY**

The towns of the Thames Valley provide a useful opportunity to explore the nature of regional urbanism in the medieval period. Changes that occurred over time were considerable and multifaceted. It is clear that each town endured mixed fortunes at different times, influenced by both local factors and wider regional impacts. The importance of wool production, manufacturing and trade to most of the towns in the Thames Valley cannot be understated. The strong pastoral character of the surrounding landscape comes to the fore in

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this sense, especially in sheep-farming which variously exploited the upland grazing of the Cotswolds and the Berkshire Downs and the lush summer grassland in the valley itself.

The shocks of the plagues that ravaged the country in the 14th century would have had tremendous impacts on labour and trade, as well as reducing the rents through burgage tenure that were vital to the prosperity of landlords and their abilities to reinvest in urban infrastructure. In some towns, notably the larger ones such as Oxford, this appears to have caused a downturn in activity and even the retraction of settled areas, while in others the impacts were less noticeable in economic terms.

The influence of London, with its access to international markets, was always at the forefront of life in the Thames Valley, bolstering agricultural production in the countryside and manufacturing in the towns. Those settlements closest to the capital, such as Staines and Kingston which were important bridge-crossings, clearly benefitted from this relationship, though even in these places the economic ‘ebb and flow’ was keenly felt. The early success of Staines, for example, drew trade and people away from Chertsey, which was an important early medieval settlement. The status of Kingston was, of course, the favoured site for the coronation of several early medieval monarchs and this would also have benefitted the town. Royal favour appears to have had dramatic influence in other towns, most notably in Windsor and Wallingford, which developed considerably in the late Saxon period and after the Norman Conquest. Wallingford, however, reached its peak in the 12th century and never recovered to its former height throughout the remainder of the medieval period, while Windsor continued to be favoured through the 13th and 14th centuries. However, royal interest and investment was not always to the benefit of the inhabitants who had lands requisitioned at will by the monarch for development and building works on state grounds.

The survey presented here is necessarily biased towards the economic history of these towns and there is much more to be said for the social lives of the wide range of inhabitants that lived in these settlements, many of whom are touched upon above through historical records of their occupations. This chapter shows that while historical records are fundamental for understanding medieval urban settlement, in terms of their establishment and development, archaeology has an important role to play in identifying the nature of the changes that occurred. This has more recently been highlighted by the gradual publication of the Extensive Urban Surveys that are doing much to reveal further insights into the

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development of towns, while intensive academic research such as Christie and Creighton's (2013) work at Wallingford shows that much new information awaits discovery.

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