

CHURCH-BUILDING AND URBAN PROSPERITY ON THE EVE OF THE REFORMATION: BASINGSTOKE AND ITS PARISH CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

The parish church of St Michael, Basingstoke was rebuilt on a grand scale in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. This lavish rebuilding reflected the increasing wealth of the town and the growth of the cloth industry of the town and surrounding area, particularly in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

I

The modern town of Basingstoke possesses one of the finest late medieval churches in Hampshire. The church is a surviving fragment of one of the principal historic centres of the county, and fortunately survived the devastation of the town in the redevelopment of the 1960s. But exactly when and why did this rebuilding occur?

The church consists of a small chancel and a much larger nave and aisles. South of the chancel was a medieval chapel, and to its north a chapel was added in the twentieth century as a war memorial. The church has a large tower at its west end and an original south porch and chamber (Fig. 1).

The eastern part of the church provides the earliest surviving part of the building. Even from the outside, it contrasts with the rest of the structure. It is constructed of flint as was typical of the medieval churches of Hampshire, where ashlar was not easily accessible. It is also on a much smaller scale to the later nave. But even here in the chancel, expansion occurred, with a new chapel and arcade added to its south. Pevsner dates this addition to the early fourteenth century (Fig. 2).

The maintenance of the chancel was the responsibility of the rector and of the lord who possessed the advowson of the church. This was initially Selborne Priory, who rebuilt the chancel in 1465 (Le Faye 1990, 91–2). A payment in the priory records in 1464–5 refers to the ‘new building of the chancel of Basingstoke church’, and to a further payment ‘parcel of the £120 of the first contract for building the said chancel of Basingstoke’ (Macray 1891, 114–5; MCM Selborne 381). A payment of such a large sum must have been a considerable investment for a poor priory like Selborne, and compares with the annual rent of £20 produced by the rectory at the turn of the century, or a potential fifteenth-century income of the Priory itself of between about £50 and £70 (MCM 56/15, 16, 24, 25; Davis 1993, 148, 157–8). The chancel was not rebuilt from the foundations. In all probability the walls were kept, but new windows and a new roof were added together with now lost fittings. The fine roof survives fully, and stylistically it would fit in with the documented date (Fig. 3). Could this have been planned in conjunction with a proposed rebuilding of the nave, both the priory and the citizens agreeing to rebuild that part of the church for which they were responsible? Later in the early sixteenth century (1528) a new doorway into the chancel was added and this still survives. The east window replaces that damaged by bombing during the Second World War.

The chancel is interesting in its own right and provides an important and well-documented roof. But what stands out above all else, is the contrast between the scale of this work and the very much grander rebuilding carried out by the parishioners on their nave,



Fig. 1 Basingstoke church from the south-east (photo: the author)

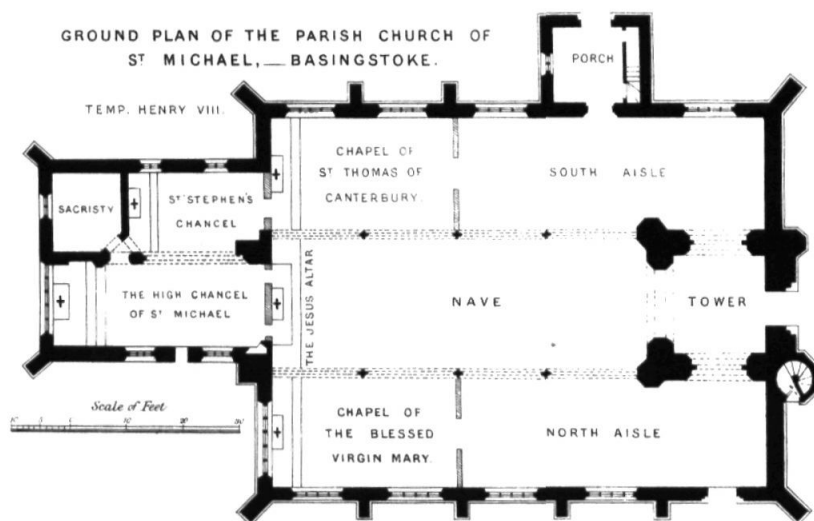


Fig. 2 Basingstoke church: ground plan (from Baigent and Millard, 1889)

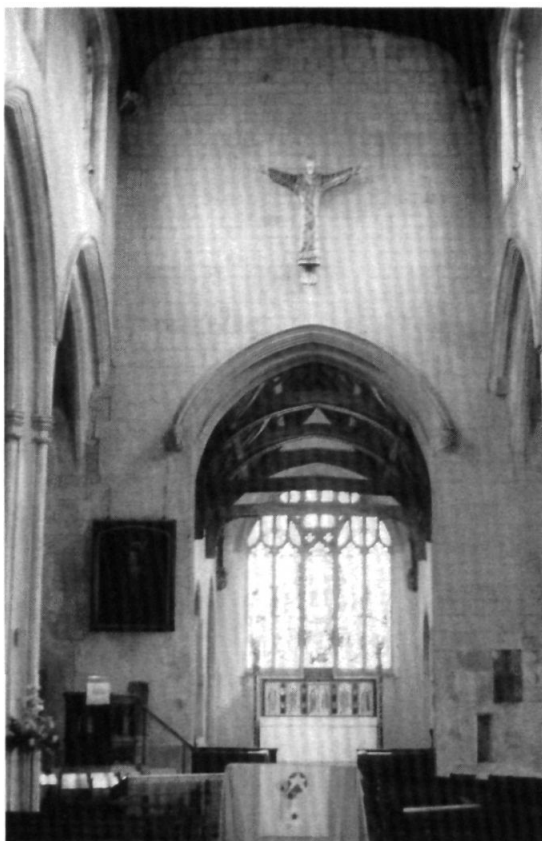


Fig. 3 Nave and chancel looking east (photo: the author)

with its wide aisles, and greater width and much greater height than the chancel (Fig. 4). This is a contrast often found in the rebuilding work of wealthy communities in the later Middle Ages, both in rural and urban churches (St Thomas' church Salisbury provides a good local example of the latter).

Traditionally, church buildings in this area used the locally available material, whether flint or the soft greensand or malmstone, as in the chancel and probably originally in the nave. But when the latter was rebuilt, it was done in ashlar. The exception was the north wall of the north aisle, which seems from the interior to be rubble covered with plaster, and was not stripped back to stone by the Victorian

restorers. Externally, the face is a chequerboard of flint and ashlar. Much of this is of recent date, from the nineteenth century or later, but it may represent a replacement for an earlier facing designed to protect the existing wall fabric. But the rest of the nave both externally and internally was constructed of ashlar; this was both more expensive to produce and to transport, and so provides a demonstration of urban wealth. It may be that the north aisle was the first to be widened at some point before the fifteenth century: its shell could subsequently be re-used and remodelled by the later and much more ambitious rebuilding. By contrast, the south aisle had to be enlarged and rebuilt completely, and was thus built in ashlar.

Putting the evidence together enables a building sequence to be reconstructed. Before the great rebuilding, the scale of the nave was probably more in keeping with that of the chancel. This is also suggested by the late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century tower, which was designed to fit in with a narrower central nave (Fig. 2). The nave possessed aisles, that were widened, starting with the north aisle. In the fifteenth century, the south aisle was widened and rebuilt in ashlar. At the same time the earlier north aisle received its present windows, so that both now have identical window tracery. The central portion of the nave was also rebuilt, making it both wider and higher, with the whole process being completed later (Fig. 5). Widening the central nave may in part have permitted the new aisles to be supported by the new nave arcades, even before the central block with its clerestory and roof was rebuilt. Thus parts of the church could continue to function during the rebuilding. Again St Thomas' church in Salisbury, provides a similar sequence, with widened aisles, a grandly-proportioned nave, and the latest work of *c.* 1500 in ashlar rather than the flint previously used (Tatton-Brown 1997, 101–9; RCHM 1980, 24–31). Basingstoke's nave roof was rebuilt in the nineteenth century, but it probably re-used earlier material and seems to have incorporated an original design (Baigent & Millard 1889). If so, there was a grand roof. The tower was begun



Fig. 4 Chancel roof (c.1465) (photo: the author)

relatively early in this sequence, but perhaps never finished before attention had turned to the much more extensive rebuilding of the nave. Another sign that the total scheme was not completed is the high arch at the east end of the south aisle. This would have provided access to a grander replacement for the earlier and lower south chapel (Fig. 1).

It is difficult to be precise and confident about the dating of the rebuilding, but the evidence points to a completion of the rebuilding in the generation after 1500. Architectural evidence of the stonework and of the roof implies a late date, Pevsner suggesting one of *c.* 1500 (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967, 90). Surviving wills suggest the presence of substantial building works in the early sixteenth century. John Clerke had left 40s in 1505 to the church repairs, John Belchamber left £20 to the buildings of the parish

church, and Richard Deane £6.13. 4d in 1521 'to the bylding and reparation of St Michael's Church in Basingstoke' (Baigent & Millard 1889, 30–1, HRO B1/1513). These are not token payments for the routine upkeep of the church. The heraldry of the corbels, if original, reinforces an early-sixteenth-century date for the upper levels of the rebuilding, including as they do the arms of Richard Fox, bishop of Winchester (1501–28). Although the painting is not original, some of the arms, including that of Fox, are cut in relief, and thus indicate the original design (Baigent & Millard 1889, 89–90). In conclusion, the scraps of specific dating and the general appearance of the building, suggest that the rebuilding began with the tower early in the fifteenth century, followed by the aisles in the second part of the fifteenth century, at a similar time to the chancel. Rebuilding sub-

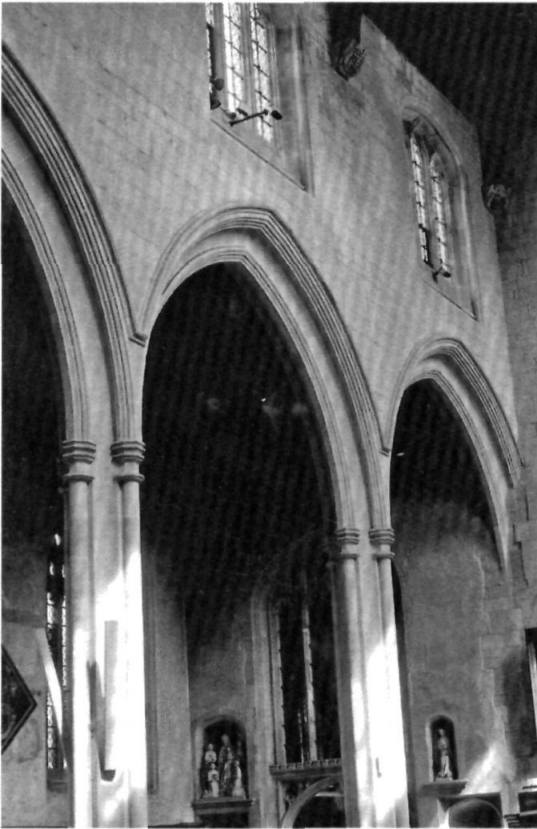


Fig. 5 North nave arcade (photo: the author)

sequently resumed or continued with the main part of the nave in the latter part of the fifteenth century and was finally finished with the clerestory and roof in the first three decades of the sixteenth century.

The church today gives us a clear sense of the grand aspirations of the town's parishioners. But its appearance would have been very different from what we see now. This was a church and a world full of different altars where masses were being said for the citizens of the town, and statues and lights were maintained in honour of particular saints. Something of this world can be seen in contemporary wills such as that of William Stocker in 1503, who was to be buried in the chapel of the Holy Ghost in Basingstoke, just outside the old town. Most of

his bequests, however, were to the main parish church 'also I bequeath to the light of the holy cross in the church of Basingstoke, two sheep. To the light of the blessed Mary there, one sheep. To the chapel of St Thomas the bishop there, one sheep. To the repairs of the Church of Basingstoke, 6s. 8d., and to the repairs of the chapel of the Holy Ghost, 3s.4d' (Baigent & Millard 1889, 30). These bequests also reflect the close links between the citizens and the world of agriculture and sheep beyond.

Henry VIII's break with Rome did not lead to an end to investment in parish churches. The new porch and room over the porch were under construction in 1539, when a small payment was left 'to the bylding of the Church porche of Basingstoke' (Baigent & Millard 1889, 31) (Fig. 6). Structurally this is clearly additional to the south aisle. But one obvious sign of religious change was the addition of signs of the royal supremacy over the east end of the nave. When the plaster was being stripped in 1850, paintings of a Tudor rose and the feathers of the Prince of Wales were uncovered (as seen in the painting hanging in the NE chapel), giving us a date between 1536 and 1547, the only time since 1509 when there was a sixteenth-century Prince of Wales. It thus provides an early example of the impact of Henry's reformation on the inside of a parish church. The royal supremacy is also reflected in the various painted royal arms still found around the church.

II

We must now try to explain such a grandiose rebuilding. Essentially this was a period of immense prosperity for the town and part of this wealth was applied to the glory of God and the pride of the town, as elsewhere in such other great urban church rebuilding as at St Thomas' Salisbury, and St Nicholas' Newbury.

Basingstoke's rise can be seen in the surviving taxation assessments. These suggest that in relative terms, Hampshire saw little growth or decline in the later Middle Ages: in 1334 it was 21st and in 1524 23rd. But this relative stability concealed substantial change within the



Fig. 6 South porch (c.1539) and the south aisle of nave (photo: the author)

county, and Basingstoke was part of an area that prospered in the fifteenth century (Hare 2001, 111–15, and abbreviated in Hare 2000, 23–26). By the early sixteenth century (in 1524/5), the town had become among the more important towns of England: 55th in the ranking by taxable population and 51st by wealth (Dyer 2000, 762, 766). It had only half the population of Winchester, but its assessment was three-quarters of that of the former capital. It might only have risen from fifth to third wealthiest town in the county, but its assessment of £69 meant that it had far overtaken Andover and Portsmouth (which had previously been above it). Basingstoke lay at the heart of an area of economic growth in north Hampshire, with towns like Odiham and above all Alton also rising in importance (Glasscock 1975, 106–18; Sheail 1998, ii, 117–40). It had been transformed from one of the small towns of local importance (Dyer

2000, 505–40), to one of much greater national significance.

To a large extent, the source of this growing wealth lay in the expansion of the cloth industry. In the late fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, England had shifted from being an exporter of raw wool to one of cloth and had become one of the greatest cloth-producing centres in Europe. Although our most complete evidence for this change comes from the figures for cloth exports and does not directly deal with production, a tax on marketed cloth (the aulnage) provides some idea of the distribution of cloth production both on a national and a county-wide scale (Carus Wilson and Coleman 1963). These aulnage accounts need to be used with caution (Carus-Wilson 1954, 279–91; Bridbury 1962, 33–5; Hare 1999, 2), but they provide us with important information on the distribution of

cloth production and marketing. They survive for Hampshire for 1394/5 and 1467 (TNA PRO E101/344/10, 11; E101/344/17 m18). They were collected on a county-wide basis, but the figures are also assessed according to individual centres. Gradually as new centres became important, the aulnager gave them a specific entry. In 1394/5 Basingstoke did not warrant its own specific entry, but by 1467 this had changed and the town registered 4.8% of the county's cloth. Basingstoke was both part of the expanding cloth industry of England, and more particularly of north Hampshire (Hare 2001, 114–5). The aulnage figures here were dominated by one very-large scale entrepreneur: Nicholas Draper who with his 160 kersies produced nearly 60 per cent of the cloth from Basingstoke and nearby Odiham.

But although we lack evidence of where the aulnage was subsequently collected, other sources show that the industry continued to grow. The Basingstoke borough courts and views of frankpledge fined individuals for trading offences. It is not always clear exactly what the offence was, and it may frequently have been a tax on the occupation. Like so much evidence about the medieval economy, these fines need to be used with caution, and little attention should be given to minor fluctuations between one court and the next. But the long term trends should be of significance and suggest continuing growth in the cloth industry (Table 1). At the beginning of the fifteenth century the town's cloth industry probably catered mainly for local demand and few people were troubled by the court. The growth of textile production and marketing in the town by 1467 is shown both by the aulnage account and by the courts, with 9 dyers and fullers being fined in 1464. Expansion then continued at the end of the century and the start of the following century, when the rebuilding of the church was probably at its peak. In 1464, the courts had fined 9 cloth makers, in 1491 19 and in 1524 it was up to 56 (Table 1). The dramatic fall in 1546 reflects a general decline in such court regulation rather than a specific trend in the cloth industry. Basingstoke probably missed out on the late fourteenth-century expansion

of the cloth industry, but it, and its surrounding area, formed parts of later waves of national expansion, in the early fifteenth century, and then above all in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century national boom. Basingstoke produced the lighter smaller kersies rather than the traditional full broadcloth. Most cloth was exported through London, but over 200 cloths were exported through Southampton in 1528 (Stevens and Olding 1985, 134, 7, 9, 151, 3). One feature of these figures may imply something about the nature of the industry: the high numbers of fullers and dyers implies that the town was a centre for the finishing industry. Weaving took place here, but much of it was probably carried out in the rural areas around, with cloth being brought to the town for finishing. More fullers than weavers were fined. Moreover, from 1470 we also see a substantial number of men fined as drapers or mercers, revealing the presence of a substantial trade in cloth, and Basingstoke's role as a major marketing centre. In the 1523 subsidy, the three mercers were assessed between £2 and £3, and were all evidently men of wealth (HRO 148/M71/2/7/18 & 148/M71/3/4/2).

But as Table 1 makes clear, Basingstoke was not a single-industry town, and its prosperity also depended on a wide range of other activities. Its position on the major route from the west country, Exeter and Salisbury to London, brought travellers and consumers to the town. This was reflected in its inns. Each year three or four hostellers were fined, for selling oat bread or horsebread or unspecified offences. This seems to have become a general fine or licence on the occupation. Moreover, they were fined much more heavily than those in other occupations. Three of the 4 innkeepers of 1524 were assessed for the subsidy of 1523, and this emphasises their wealth. John Belchamber was one of the richest men in the town, being one of a few assessed at the highest figure of £4; two others also had high assessments, of 45s and 20s, compared with most assessment of 4d or a few shillings (HRO 148/M71/3/4/2). As in Andover, innkeepers were part of a wealthy urban elite (Hare 2005, 191–2). They played an important marketing role for food, not merely

Table 1 Occupations fined at Basingstoke 1399-1546

	1399	1423	1437	1455	1464	1470	1491	1516	1524	1531	1546
Victuals											
bakers	2	2	2	2	2	2	4	7	4	5	5
brewers & tapsters	39	38	43	35	34	42	37	28	32	34	10
butcher	1	5	3	4	3	4	4	2	5	2	2
fishmonger	1	3	1	2	1	1	4	6	2	4	4
inn-keeper	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	3
millers	3	3	3	2	4	3	5	4	4	4	3
<i>Sub-total</i>	50	55	55	48	47	55	57	51	51	53	27
Textiles											
dyers					5	1	4	4	5	3	3
fullers				1	4	2	10	25	28	30	5
weavers	2		3	4			5	15	23	19	
<i>Sub-total</i>	2	0	3	5	9	3	19	44	56	52	8
Leather											
shoemaker, tanner, glover, saddler etc		2	3	4	5	5	5	6	8	9	5
Clothing											
cap-maker, hosier, tailor	11	9	2	3	5	7	5	8	7	5	
Mercantile											
grocers					6						
drapers and mercers		1			2	8	9	11	8	14	13
<i>Sub-total</i>		1			8	8	9	11	8	14	13

		1399	1423	1437	1455	1464	1470	1491	1516	1524	1531	1546
Metal												
	smith, brasier, iron-monger	3	3	3	2	4	3	2	3	3	3	
Building												
	carpenter, mason, tiler		1	8	4	5	2		3	3	1	
Wood												
	cooper, wheel-wright, joiner				2	1	3	1	1			
Others												
	fletcher, chandlers, barbers etc	5	1	1	1	3	4	3	5	6	5	3
Labourers		7	9	9		2	9	17	24	16	14	
Journey- man							4					
Total		78	81	84	69	89	103	118	156	158	156	56

Sources: HRO 148/M71/2/7/1, 2/7/2, 2/7/5, Baigent & Millard 1898, 289-90, 2/7/7, 2/7/9, 2/7/17, 2/7/18, 2/7/19, 2/7/27

for bread and ale. In 1519 and 1520, the court accused the innkeepers of taking up all the fresh fish, keeping the best and selling what was left at an excessive price to the poor 'Then as we might have of the fisher five herrings for a penny, they will sell us but four herrings for a penny'. In 1420, inn-holders were forbidden to buy fish before the bailiff had seen it and set it on sale (Baigent & Millard 1889, 323, and see also 324–5).

Richard Kingsmill provides us with a well-documented example of one such innkeeper. He came from a well-established family in Basingstoke, where William Kyngsmyle was one of the two bailiffs, or key figures, of the town in 1390–1 (Baigent & Millard 1889, 434). They also had connections with Barkum in Berkshire. Richard is recorded as a Basingstoke inn-keeper in 1455, 1464 and 1470, selling bread and horsebread. His activities were on a large scale. In 1454 he was fined 10s as a hostiller (compared with only 6s 8d for the two other innkeepers) and an additional 1s for brewing. In 1470 he was fined 12s, more than the fines of 10s and 5s imposed on the other two innkeepers and much more than the fines of those with other occupations (HRO 148M71/2/7/7). Kingsmill had the highest assment for the subsidy of 1481 (HRO 148M71/3/4/1). In 1480–3, he paid a half year rent of £3 12s.7d, about twice the next highest payment (Baigent & Millard 1889, 380–1). He was described as 'of Basingstoke' in a purchase of land in Whitchurch in 1470, and he served as its bailiff in 1464–5 and 1487–8 (Baigent & Millard 1889, 435–6). The ambiguity of his social position was reflected in descriptions as grazier, yeoman and gentleman. His interests went beyond his inn into agriculture, as seen in his description as grazier, his substantial sheep flocks of over 200 wethers, and his role as a demesne lessee. He also marketed cloth in 1467. He acted in local government as J.P. M.P. and tax assessor. (Hare, 2001 119; Hare 2005, 192; Baigent & Millard 1889, 395; Wedgwood 1936, 516–7; ODNB, Kingsmill family; HRO 19M61/HMC/202; PRO E101/344/17 m18). Subsequently members of the family expanded these roles still further. His son John passed through Winchester College and New College Oxford,

on the way to success in the law as a royal justice of common pleas, and was a key figure in the local government of the county. At the dissolution of the monasteries, one Kingsmill was prior of St Swithun's Winchester and Richard's grand-daughter was abbess of Wherwell. Other Kingsmills remained in Basingstoke among the influential men of the town: one had been fuller (and brewer) in 1455 and fuller in 1470 (HRO 148M71/2/7/5 & 7). John Kingsmill fuller (or a father and son) was bailiff, four times between 1503 and 1510 (Baigent & Millard 1889, 436). In 1524, a Richard Kingsmill was a fuller, and another member of the family was a miller, although with a much smaller assessment (HRO 148M71/2/7/18; Baigent & Millard, 436 for 1503–4, 1506–7. 1508–9, 1509–10).

Basingstoke was also a major centre of consumption. Each year about 50 people were fined for pursuing activities in the food trade from brewing and taverns, to butchers, bakers and fish-mongers, numbers that reflect a thoroughly urban context. This urban character is also seen in the wide range of manufacturing occupations in metal, leather, and clothing, with specialist occupations such as brasier, fletcher, glover and hosier (Table 1). As the town prospered, so too did the demand grow for more consumer goods. Most of its luxury goods probably came from London. The published brokerage books suggest that Basingstoke made infrequent use of Southampton, and this mainly for basic goods: salt, fish, wine and some hops in 1528, and wine in 1448, but not luxury goods, spices and dyestuffs, for which it probably depended on London or Winchester merchants (Coleman 1960–1; Lewis 1993; Harwood 2007; Stevens and Olding 1985).

The court fines (Table 1) suggest that there was a growing demand for consumer goods at the end of the fifteenth century and the early part of the sixteenth century. But the courts also suggest an increased concern for the problems of urban life. There seem more cases involving the food supply, and access to, for example, fish, or butter, eggs and cheese (Baigent & Millard 1889, 316). There was also greater concern about controlling the journey-men, apprentices and servants. Tapsters were

keeping the apprentices drinking beyond 7 o'clock and servants beyond 9 o'clock. In 1517, householders, journeymen and apprentices were carrying knives and daggers on Sundays and holidays, and in 1507 common brawling between apprentices, serving-men and outsiders was getting out of hand (Baigent & Millard 1889, 320, 322, 311).

III

The court records enable us to glimpse something of the activity, hustle and bustle that lay behind Basingstoke's dramatic urban growth in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. No doubt its citizens spent much of the wealth that was generated on their homes, although sadly most of those that survived were destroyed unrecorded in the 1960s. But they also spent on the church and on the rebuilding of Holy Cross chapel (which seems to have been remodelled at the same time as Sir William Sandys built his own chapel there). Above all they almost completely rebuilt the parish church itself. Like many other communities who benefited from the growth of the cloth industry, the citizens poured some of their new-found wealth into their church. Hampshire has nothing to compare with the wide-scale

rebuilding of churches in the Suffolk and Essex areas as at Lavenham and Long Melford, or in Somerset, Wiltshire and Devon as at Huish Episcopi, Steeple Ashton, and Tiverton. But there was an area of north-east Hampshire where an expanding industry generated wealth and with it church rebuilding and enlargement, as at Odiham and Alton. The fifteenth and early sixteenth century saw both the period of Basingstoke's greatest importance and of the building of its new church. This was not coincidental. Both peaked in the early sixteenth century. The church reminds us of its integral role in the ideas of the contemporaries. This was not a people waiting in eager anticipation of the Reformation. But it also reminds us of the economic and communal life of the time, and of the economic growth that was occurring in some parts of England. Despite all that has gone on around it, this church still bears witness to a period of vital importance for Basingstoke and Hampshire.

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APPENDIX

This is not an attempt to provide a full account of the church's history but reference needs to be made to later alterations. The main restoration seems to have been in 1840–1 by J B Clacy involving restoration of roof and stripping walls back to ashlar. This continued until at least 1850. Later work, by T H Wyatt in 1879, included adding the pinnacles to the incomplete tower, followed by that of Oatley and Lawrence of Bristol from 1907, and by Sir

Charles Nicholson in 1919–21. Nicholson's work included the addition of a new N chapel as a war memorial. Subsequently repairs were needed in response to a fire in the north aisle in 1938, and to damage from bombs that fell nearby during the Second World War, including the replacement of the east window. Baigent and Millard, 1889, 88–9, 499–532; R. Hubbock, pers. comm., Hubbock, 1996, 12).