BASINGSTOKE: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT, c.1000- c.1700

Growth

Basingstoke possesses a long and rich history that goes back before the Norman Conquest. For long it served as the market centre for North East Hampshire, providing consumer goods and necessities for the surrounding villages, and a market for their own agricultural produce. Occasionally it became a major manufacturing centre for national and international trade, as in the 15th and 16th centuries for cloth, and again in the latter part of the 19th century for engineering and clothing.¹

The origins of Basingstoke probably lie in one of many settlements dependent on the royal manor of Basing. Its first documented reference is in 990.² Its location was well suited to trade, where the main east-west route along the northern edge of the chalklands was crossed by a route going north towards Reading and the Thames valley, and where it merged with that from Southampton and Winchester. Basingstoke was probably emerging as a town by the time of the Domesday Book in 1086. It was then one of the few centres in the county recorded as possessing a market, in this case valued at 30s., suggesting the presence of some form of specialist trading.³ In the Pipe Roll of 1167-8, it paid £8.13s.4d. in the aid, a substantial figure, but, as in the Domesday entry, it was valued at less than Alton.⁴

The town had probably grown out of a group of valley settlements represented by the settlement around the parish church, by Eastrop and by a possible north bank settlement, on the later site of the hospital of St John. The market probably lay on the site of the later market square, to the south of these settlements and on the high ground, where it was adjacent to the natural main route from the south-west towards London. As the town grew these various elements were linked together in a single settlement, and in a compact complex of streets on both sides of the river Loddon. The later London and Winchester roads represented the main through east-west road, while from the market, two main north-south routes (Church Street and Wote Street) crossed the river Loddon and continued to Newbury and to Reading respectively). Intersecting east-west streets linked these main routes (Potters Lane and North Brook Street).

The medieval town’s main public buildings included the parish church, the town hall or Mote (adjacent to the market), the chapel of the Holy Ghost, and the hospital of St John, with a major almshouse being added in the 17th century. The town also remained an agricultural community, the compressed urban centre being surrounded until 1788 by its open fields.

The town was already a royal possession in Domesday Book in 1086, but early achieved self-government under the crown. By about 1200, there is clear evidence of the crown devolving responsibility to the townsmen. In 1174 a reeve of the town is referred to.⁵ Subsequently the crown delegated to the town the responsibility for finance and its annual rent.

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⁴ Pipe R 1167-8 (PRS 11), 181-2.
⁵ Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 359; Pipe R 1174-5 (PRS 22), 194.
as in 1211/2, 1228, 1230, 1256, while in 1237, the bailiffs of Basingstoke were cited before the justices concerning a £20 loan. In 1212 it was required to provide the king with soldiers. The manor was granted by the king to the men of the town in 1256 a grant subsequently renewed in 1329, 1414 and 1449. The crown also delegated some legal responsibilities, the town being represented by its own jury in 1236. It was freed from the sheriff’s interference in 1241 and in 1275 it possessed return of writs. It received a new charter and common seal in 1392. Like many towns, the town gained a charter of incorporation in the early 17th century, in 1622, and again in 1641. A town hall or Motte Hall existed by 1389, and subsequently it periodically appears in the documentation, as a first floor hall and usually in relation to building decay. Repairs were planned in 1570. Later in 1656 the town hall was burnt down, but its successor, built in 1657, survived until the 19th century.

The town possessed a single parish church which had been given to the abbey of Mont St Michael in Normandy in 1079. It was later purchased by Pierre des Roches, bishop of Winchester, who acquired it in 1233/4 together with the churches of Selborne and Basing, to help endow his new foundation of Selborne Priory. In 1485/6, bishop Waynflete dissolved this small poor monastery and gave its endowment to his new foundation of Magdalen College Oxford. Since the rector was, for almost the whole of the period, an absentee ecclesiastical institution, the town’s more important churchman was the vicar, who was appointed by the Priory or the College.

Although there was only a single parish church, the importance of the town was reflected in the development of other religious institutions. A hospital existed from an early date, and was founded or refounded as a home for elderly clergy with royal protection by Walter of Merton in 1262, who had inherited lands here from his mother. The chapel of the Holy Ghost, reputedly originated in a graveyard set up outside the town in the interdict of John’s reign. It soon became a substantial building, able to host the ordination of 140 men in 1309. It was an important element in the late medieval town. Here the major guild of the town was based, and the chapel went through a dramatic rebuilding programme in the early

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8 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 362.
9 Cal Charter Rolls, 4, 121.
10 Cal. Charter Rolls, 1, 68; Cal Fine Rolls HIII, 2, 189, 330.
12 Cal. Charter Rolls, 1, 453.
14 Cal Charter Rolls, 6, 107.
16 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 439—452.
18 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 82.
19 Cal Charter Roll I 182-3 (1233); Ed. J. Morris, Domesday Book, 4, Hampshire.
22 Cal Charter Rolls, 2, 44.
23 Vincent, Peter des Roches, although he adds, ‘supposedly founded’, 82.
24 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 694-6.
16th century under the combined efforts of the neighbouring Lord Sandys, of the Vyne, and the citizens themselves, involving both a new chancel and a new chantry chapel, with magnificent window glass, much of which is now at the Vyne.25 Most of what remains of the chapel comes from this major rebuilding.

By the end of the 13th century, Basingstoke had emerged as one of the main regional centres of Hampshire with the sixth highest assessment in the county in the taxation of 1334.26 Its importance was reflected in sending MPs to parliament in 1295, 1302 and 1306, although this subsequently ceased at the request of the townsman.27 We know almost nothing about the town’s trade. Much would have been local trade that linked the town and the villages around. The presence of such specialism is reflected in occasional surnames in the 1327 tax returns or other sources: a baker, a cooper, a wheeler, a tailor, a carpenter and a weaver.28 But we also gain occasional glimpses of its long-distance trade: as in the export of wool through Southampton, with several Basingstoke merchants recorded in 1270s.29

The later 14th century represents a poorly documented phase in the town’s past. Like all communities it would have been devastated by the Black Death of 1348-9 which here as elsewhere probably wiped out about half the population of the town. On a more limited scale the town was struck by a major conflagration in 1392.

The town recovered from these traumas and prospered in the 15th and early 16th century playing a key role in this area of expanding cloth production. This was at a time when England shifted from being an exporter of wool to one of manufactured cloth. This expansion generated both jobs and surpluses for consumption. By the early 16th century (in 1524/5), it had become one of the more important towns of England: 55th in the ranking by taxable population and 51st by wealth. 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 sixth to third wealthiest town in Hampshire, but it had far overtaken Andover, Portsmouth and Ringwood (which had previously surpassed it), and it now had an assessment over twice that of Portsmouth, the next highest in that group.30 Basingstoke lay at the heart of an area of economic growth in nearby towns in north Hampshire, such as Odiham and above all Alton (which rose to national importance and to the fourth most important town in Hampshire).

The causes of the town’s rise to prominence lay, above all, in the expansion of the cloth industry. Basingstoke was both a centre of production, and of the marketing and finishing of cloth produced in the villages around. As a marketing centre, it was a focus for the activities of the countryside around, buying and marketing agricultural produce and cloth, and providing consumer goods to purchase. As the town’s economy grew in the 15th century, so did the number of its craftsmen who were required to cater for this new prosperity. Its trading activities also grew. It is impossible for us to quantify the trade with London, through which so much of

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27 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 77.
29 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 185; Cal Pat, Hen III, 1266-72, 555, 689.
the cloth would be exported, but its imports from Southampton dramatically increased in the 16th century, particularly in wine, fish and woad.

Basingstoke’s Domesday market continued, albeit changing the day from Sunday to Monday in 1203 and to Wednesday in 1214. There are other early references to markets in 1234 and 1267-8, and it continued until the 20th century. Later the town acquired a fair by royal grant in 1449. Most fairs long preceded this, and it may have reflected growing prosperity and ambitions of the town. It was to be held around the chapel of the Holy Ghost, a prominent feature of urban life, and this may also suggest the initiative of the town lay behind this grant. A second fair is mentioned in 1622, but is not known from any other source. The town became of increasing regional importance as seen in the growth of its trade with Southampton and the increasing number of carts that went direct to the town, seen through the exceptional evidence of the Brokage Books of Southampton which recorded all the carts leaving Southampton and their destinations. The town’s regional role was also helped by its continuing position on the main route from London to Salisbury recognised by Shakespeare and, the royal post. This would have also helped generate further prosperity for the innkeeping fraternity. There were usually three inns and innkeepers, and men such as Richard Kingsmill and John Belchamber, were generally among the wealthy elite of the town.

In a real sense, the early 16th century was to see the town at the peak of its importance, reflected in its building activities: rebuilding the parish church and, together with Lord Sandys, the chapel of the Holy Ghost, as well as in countless rebuilt houses (although most were destroyed in the 1960s). But the growth of the town and particularly of its cloth industry posed problems for the town government, as reflected in the activities of the court and the need to try and control the new industrial proletariat: their drinking, weaponry and brawling.

The Reformation produced some dramatic changes, but it also reflected the essential continuities of urban life. The last decades of the old regime had seen the rebuilding of the parish church and the chapel of the Holy Ghost. There were attacks on images. Lord Sandys was asked to send a particular one to Thomas Cromwell in 1538. If the church possessed a doom painting over the chancel arch this would have been removed and wall was painted white with decorated Tudor rose and Prince of Wales feathers dating this to between 1537 and 1547. But building works continued in 1539 with a new porch. The accession of Mary, allowed for the return of traditional religion. Town leaders took the opportunity to recover the lands of the

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31 S. Letters, Gazetteer of markets and fairs in England and Wales to 1516, List and Index Society, Kew##, 151; Cal Charter roll, 6, 107.
35 Hare, ‘Church-building and urban prosperity’, 190-1.
36 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 320, 322, 311.
39 J. Hare, ‘Church-building and urban prosperity’ 181-5.
Holy Ghost Chapel, previously confiscated under Edward VI. Thereafter, it remained a combination of a chapel, in which distinguished members of the town continued to be buried and a school. The records of the guild provide a sense of what needed to be spent and done to achieve this refoundation, and of the readiness to pay to restore the old institutions.  

Difficulties and decline

The next century and a half was to be a time of difficulties and decline, but it is important not to exaggerate this. Basingstoke remained one of the most important towns in the county. If we look at the ranking of Hampshire towns as seen in the number of communicants, Basingstoke evidently fell. While she had been a clear third in the number of taxpayers in 1524/5, in 1603 she was sixth behind Romsey, Christchurch and Ringwood, and was fifth in 1676. But she was still important. Most towns grew between 1603 and 1676, and ranking them according to the percentage increase shows Basingstoke as eighth out of 21. Another indicator of economic activity is reflected in its prominence in the production of trade tokens. Of the 27 towns and villages whose traders issued trade tokens in mainland Hampshire, Basingstoke’s five traders placed it as fifth in the county. Here was a town whose greatest days might be over, but it was certainly not in dramatic decline and remained very important.

The cloth industry, which had been main driving force of the town’s earlier heyday, faced difficulties. Basingstoke remained a major cloth town both in its occupational structure and amongst those who dominated local affairs, but the industry underwent a series of recessions and never fully recovered. The evidence of wills and inventories shows the presence of major cloth producers and traders, particularly in the first half of the century. The petition of 1631 complaining about the state of the industry nevertheless reflects the presence of merchants and workers who still expected to earn their living through cloth. Moreover, other parts of the economy remained important. The town was a significant agricultural and trading market, particularly for grain. It also remained a main route to the capital, as London grew in national prominence, with all the demands that this generated. In 1686, a military survey of stabling and beds for travellers showed that Basingstoke possessed, after Winchester and Andover, the greatest amount of stabling of anywhere in Hampshire, although the port towns of Portsmouth and Southampton, with their different demands for accommodation, pushed it into fifth place for beds. To Celia Fines, an observer in the 1690s, Basingstoke obviously gave the impression of possessing a flourishing through-trade ‘a large town for to entertaine travellers and commodious’, and ‘a large town and has a good trade being a Road’.

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42 Of course these figures represent a comparison between taxpayers and communicants, but the ratio between the two could be taken as approximately constant if all towns grew at the same rate.  
43 Rosen, ‘Winchester in transition’, 174; or 5th in types of tokens, *VCH Hants* IV, 428.  
There were also more local factors producing decline. The national prominence and local spending of the Paulet, Marquises of Winchester in the 16th century, whether capital expenditure in the expansion of Basing House or the everyday spending by lord or visitors, can only have benefitted local traders. William, the first marquis had risen to importance under Henry VIII, holding a variety of major posts before becoming lord Treasurer of England, a post that he held from 1550 until his death in 1572, and had spent lavishly rebuilding his ancestral home making it one of the largest private houses in the kingdom. The destruction of Basing House after a protracted siege (1643-5) in the 17th century civil war would nevertheless have been damaging to a town whose economy was already weakened. To these should be added the fires of 1601 and 1656. But recovery and investment continued as with expenditure on the Holy Ghost chapel and school, or the installation of a new gallery in the parish church on 1621 and remodelling of the church during the damage of the civil war years.

The Duke of Tuscany visited the town on the way from Salisbury to London in 1669. His secretary wrote in his diary, ‘The town, which is wretched, both in regard to the buildings, the greater part of which are in wood, and the total absence of trade’. While we should be careful not to read too much into one comment it perhaps reinforces the idea of a town that had at least stagnated since its glory days, when the timber-framing would have been the norm for the buildings of the wealthy. Now it was a town where trade was in decay. It had lost its role as a major industrial town and returned to the role it occupied for most of its history, as a market town, purchasing the agricultural produce and providing consumer goods for the rural hinterland of North East Hampshire. This was the role that it was largely to retain until after the coming of the railways in the mid 19th century, when once again the town became an important industrial centre.

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49 Fuller quoted in Pevsner North Hampshire, 431.
50 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke.
51 J.E.Millard, Book of accounts of the wardens of the fraternity of the Holy Ghost in Basingstoke, 1557-1654.
52 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 503-9, 517-8.
53 Baigent & Millard, Basingstoke, 80.