UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STUDY OF MEDIEVAL LONDON
ALDGATE PROJECT
REPORT FOR THE YEAR 1 JAN. - 31 DEC. 1984

1 INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

1.1 The aim of the project is to study, primarily from documentary sources, the character and development of the eastern suburb of the city of London outside Aldgate up to c. 1670. The method is to reconstruct the history and topographical layout of the houses, gardens, and other properties in the area. This information is then used to examine the density and extent of settlement, the pattern of land use, the social and occupational structure, and the operation of the property market. Abundant documentation survives from the twelfth century onwards, and in a few instances it has been possible to trace topographical features and tenurial patterns in the area through written records to the period before 1100.

1.2 The suburban sample was chosen in order to complement and add depth to the remarkable conclusions concerning the long-term development of London which have emerged from a similar study of a central area around Cheapside, undertaken as part of Stage One of the Social and Economic Study of Medieval London. For the development of the city as a whole the most striking of these conclusions concerns the great intensity of land use and high property-values which prevailed c. 1300 by comparison with later periods. The centre of London was emptier during the early decades of the sixteenth century than it had been two hundred years before, and the great expansion of the city which took place during the sixteenth century did not really become evident in the centre until the middle of the century. Should this pattern be repeated for an area on the fringes of the settlement, conventional estimates of the size and importance of London c. 1300 would be in need of substantial revision; should a contrary pattern emerge, the relationship of centre and suburbs would probably have changed between the fourteenth and the later sixteenth century, and an opportunity would be presented for examining changes in the internal dynamic of urban growth over this period. A suburban sample also provides an opportunity for studying the process by which open land came to be subdivided and built-up, both in the thirteenth century and in the sixteenth and seventeenth.

1.3 Concurrently with this project, the Social and Economic Study of Medieval London is working on another sample area immediately east of the Cheapside sample and on either side of the Walbrook stream. This should reveal the character of an area close to the centre of the city but set apart from its most vital commercial district. The Walbrook Study is financed by an anonymous donor and is described in a separate report. For the sample area, see Fig. 1.

2 MATERIAL COVERED AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

2.1 During this year the greater part of the source material for the project has been identified, abstracted, and arranged according to the properties to which it refers. The property transfers and comparable material enrolled in the city's court of Husting have provided a comprehensive coverage of the area between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, and a great deal of miscellaneous information for the later part of the study period. In addition, the city's records are particularly valuable for the detailed picture they provide of the ditch outside the city wall, where from c. 1530 onwards plots of land were enclosed and let on lease. Except for the plots immediately outside Aldgate, building did not take place here until after c. 1580 onwards, and the street frontages the ditch in Houndsditch and Minories were not fully built up until well into the seventeenth century. Of the other institutions with major archives concerning properties in the area, the records of only three remain to be studied, although half a dozen small archives (principally of city parishes within the walls) and some small collections in record offices outside London have yet to be covered. It is hoped that this remaining material will be dealt with over the next two to three months.

2.2 The historical and topographical reconstruction of the suburb outside Aldgate cannot be carried out as completely as for the Cheapside sample. This is partly because the Aldgate area, although larger than the Cheapside sample (cf. Fig. 1), was much less densely settled, with house plots backing on to open ground rather than on to the rear of other house plots, so that the network of recorded relationships between holdings provides fewer opportunities for identifying and locating them. Also, since the suburb was subject to more extreme swings in population levels than the centre, the pattern of property boundaries underwent correspondingly greater variation. For the period of rapid growth from c. 1550 onwards, when, in addition, deeds lack the topographical precision of earlier records, there is thus a larger proportion of source material which cannot be attributed to particular sites than for areas within the walls. Even so, a number of properties, particularly those belonging to institutions, are well recorded in the latter part of the period and, as Fig. 2 shows, they form a representative sample of locations throughout the area. For some areas, notably the site of the great garden of Holy Trinity Priory (see Fig. 2), the concentration of records concerning properties in private ownership is sufficient to convey a good impression of the subdivision of plots, the types of building erected, and the range of trades practiced, even though exact topographical reconstruction is not possible. For the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, therefore, the study will concentrate on the development of these well recorded areas and make minimal use of the 'unattributable' information.

2.3 The sampling strategy has evolved in other ways according to the available information and the primary concerns of the research. Thus, at an early stage it was decided not to cover the precinct of St. Katherine's Hospital, for which the records of property holding are patchy, in spite of the extensive listings of alien residents there

during the sixteenth century. Likewise, no attempt is being made to trace in detail the development of the site of the abbey of St. Mary Graces after its dissolution. On the other hand, seventeenth-century plans of the site, which was then occupied by navy victualling houses, have been used to establish the main features of the abbey layout. This in turn helps in interpreting the records of the parcels of land acquired to make the abbey precinct in the fourteenth century, and from these it is possible to establish the character of settlement at the limits of the built-up area on the eve of the Black Death. It has also been possible to integrate the study of this site with the results of a recent archaeological excavation (see Fig. 4).

2.4 The sample covered does not correspond exactly to the suburb under the city's extra-mural jurisdiction as it was defined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Originally the city's jurisdiction appears to have extended to the river and to have been coterminous with the parish of St. Botolph. The precincts of St. Katharine's Hospital and the abbey of St. Mary Graces were formally excluded from the parish by the mid-thirteenth century and in 1364, respectively. St. Katharine's precinct was formally excluded from the city's jurisdiction in 1444. In this way the southern part of the parish came almost to be cut off from the remainder. Even so, in the 1390s and 1420s properties on the south side of East Smithfield were said to lie within the city's ward of Portsoken. By the sixteenth century, however, the city's jurisdiction did not extend south of East Smithfield. The sample, defined primarily as the parish of St. Botolph for the purpose of identifying relevant records, thus included areas which from the sixteenth century onwards lay in Middlesex rather than the city. This provides an opportunity for examining whether the exercise of control by the city authorities had a significant difference on the character of the suburb.

3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

3.1 Topographically, the area falls into four main parts (cf. Fig. 2). Aldgate Street (now Aldgate High Street) was a busy thoroughfare which was always the most densely built-up part of the suburb; elsewhere, until the late sixteenth century, buildings seem largely to have been confined to the street frontages. Houndsditch and Minories, the two streets following the outer edge of the city ditch, and gently sloping from N. to S., each contained long narrow properties extending back to land beyond the suburban limit, which was not built on until after c. 1600. The pattern of the Houndsditch properties was altered with the extension of the garden of Holy Trinity Priory in the thirteenth century. The Minories was more densely settled, probably on account of the traffic between Aldgate and the river. The third area, around the fairly level open space comprising Tower Hill and East Smithfield, had a commercial and marketing character. Finally, S. of East Smithfield was a steeper slope into the marshy area extending to the river. The meadows here were built on for the first time during the late sixteenth century and the records reveal the difficulties concerning paving and drainage which had to be solved.

3.2 Throughout the area, even in Aldgate Street, the disposal of surface

water appears to have posed a more serious problem than near Cheapside. References to ditches and soakaways are common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In other ways, too , the area had a distinctly rural aspect: gardens, hardly mentioned in the Cheapside area, are common in the records, as are mud walls, wooden fences, and thorn hedges, which do not occur at all near Cheapside. Except near Aldgate Street, stone or brick walls do not seem to have been used to mark the boundaries of private properties in the suburb before the mid sixteenth century.

3.3 The thirteenth century and the mid sixteenth to seventeenth century emerge from the records as the two periods when the density of settlement in the suburb was increasing. In the earlier period divisions of properties and the quit-rents due from them clearly reveal the process in Aldgate Street, Houndsditch, and Minories; it may have been continuous since the eleventh century or earlier. Subdivision took its most extreme form in the Minories, which by 1300 contained many small holdings less than 10 feet in width and over 300 feet in length, as is shown by Fig. 3, concerning a property acquired after 1442 by London Bridge. This pattern of holdings presumably arose because the occupants of the houses next to the street found that the use of the land behind could make a significant addition to their subsistence or income, and therefore claimed as much of it as they could. With a lesser demand for land the rear parts of these plots might have been combined to form larger crofts, while with a greater demand for housing they might have been built upon and tenurially divided from the land near the street as came to be the case in the seventeenth century. The Bridge property shows that the trend towards subdivision had been reversed by 1340, and after the Black Death there was only one tenement and garden where there had previously been four. This property was probably divided into two on an E./W. line shortly after 1500; by 1520 there were four houses there; about 1526 a stable was converted into a house, and by 1600 there were six houses there; there were eight or nine houses soon after 1650 and 23 houses by 1675. The physical process can be reconstructed from the records of tenancies and from a plan of c. 1700 (cf. Fig. 3); it appears to have been common throughout the suburb and provides an explanation for the twisting network of alleyways which is revealed as a widespread feature of the suburb by Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1676. Two large houses occupied the frontage while smaller houses were added in the yard immediately behind, sometimes by converting sheds into residences. The garden plots with which each of these houses was provided were intermixed in the rear part of the property. Some of these gardens may have been for recreation (suggested, in the case of the Bridge property, by the fact that the gardens of the largest houses were furthest removed from the street) and might contain banqueting-houses or garden-houses. Others had industrial uses: one at the Bridge property contained a still-house, and at a similar property in Houndsditch the gardens behind contained tallow melting-houses. As use of these plots became more intensive each required independent access and networks of passages developed, often interconnecting between the freehold units within which they had originally emerged.

3.3 In some other parts of the suburb which grew very rapidly during the seventeenth century and where the tenurial pattern was less complex,

physical features had a more marked effect on the pattern of building. This was clearly the case with the houses in the city ditch, and in Lower East Smithfield towards the river the existing pattern of drainage ditches determined the layout of the long alleys of small houses built during the seventeenth century.

3.4 Although the Aldgate suburb was noted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for the large number of its poor inhabitants, and had always been relatively poor, there was, throughout the study period, a small number of substantial houses there. None of these, however, had so high a rental value as the largest Cheapside houses. Some of them had a very long history. Thus one house in Minories, to which an extensive estate of agricultural land outside the suburb was attached, can be traced as the residence of successive families of wealthy citizens from the early twelfth to the mid seventeenth centuries. Even during the sixteenth century, when the suburb was growing rapidly, large houses could be built on hitherto unoccupied land. This was the case on the site of the garden of Holy Trinity where a great brick house with gardens, bowling alleys, and banqueting houses was erected only a few yards away from the tallow houses and foundries in Houndsditch. The cheapness and rural aspect of such sites perhaps made them attractive to wealthy men who did not require a base close to the main centres of commerce, but the area never attracted the palatial residences characteristic of some other suburbs and areas of the city.

3.5 The evidence concerning housing, however, does clearly bring out the prevailing poverty of the suburb. Thus, by comparison with the Cheapside area, most houses were small and of low value; there were higher proportions of vacant houses and of poor men and widows among tenants; during the plague of 1625 a higher proportion of rents fell into arrears than within the walls.

3.6 The recorded occupations of the suburb clearly reflect its special functions and the natural resources of the area. For the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the deeds provide a clear, and probably representative, picture of the trades of property holders. Prominent in Aldgate Street were smiths and brewers. Several of the brewhouses were in the fifteenth century described as inns, but by the mid sixteenth century had ceased to function and had been converted into rows of small dwellings. The large brewhouses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were situated towards the river. Another trade associated with transport which occurs in the area throughout the study period was that of carter or drayman. The loam and gravel in the suburban fields were dug for use in building. The tilers who were active in the suburb by 1300 presumably used this earth. The numerous potters (ollarii) active at the same time were probably founders, who used the loam to make moulds for brass pots and bells; by 1400 they were known as bell-founders, and their successors in the area were the gunfounders, who in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries supplied the royal ordnance depots at the Tower and in Minories. It may have been the presence of metal working expertise in the area which accounted for the cluster of moneyers in Aldgate Street around 1300. Towards 1400 butchers became prominent in the area. This may reflect the contraction of the suburb, leaving more room for grazing

and marshalling stock close to the city, for before the Black Death London butchers had been active at Stratford, well beyond the limits of the suburb to the east. An associated trade was that of tallow melting prominent in Houndsditch during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when additional noxious trades such as vinegar making and soap boiling also came to be established in the suburb.

3.7 During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the variety of manufacturing and service trades in the suburb steadily increased. Many of these trades were associated with maritime affairs. Notable among the service trades were the trumpeters and musicians, poor men who perhaps found employment at the Tower. While the records of property holding provide many vivid insights into the activities of these groups, they are too scattered to provide a reliable overall picture in this period. The Hearth Tax returns, which provided such a picture for the Cheapside area, do not give occupations for the suburb. Parish records, however, can supplement this deficiency, for between 1583 and 1625 the parish clerks' memoranda of baptisms and burials regularly note both the occupation and the place of residence of householders. It is proposed to examine the occupational structure of the parish, the changes taking place around 1600, and the topographical distribution of trades by means of two five-year samples of this material at the beginning and the end of the period.

3.8 The picture of the long-term development of London which arises from the suburban sample both complements and enlarges that derived from the Cheapside sample. Rent sequences earlier than the fifteenth century do not exist for the suburb, and those of a later date have yet to be analysed in detail, but it is already clear that in broad terms the trends for the two areas correspond. These indicate increasing activity up to the early fourteenth century, then contraction from which no lasting recovery is made until the sixteenth century. Signs of renewed activity, in terms of land values and numbers of houses, become evident sooner in the suburb than in Cheapside, in the 1520s rather than towards the middle of the century, perhaps indicating that initially more people required cheap housing than a property which would enable them to participate in the commerce of the city centre. Between the mid sixteenth and the mid seventeenth century, in both population and the number of houses, the suburb grew much more rapidly than the centre.

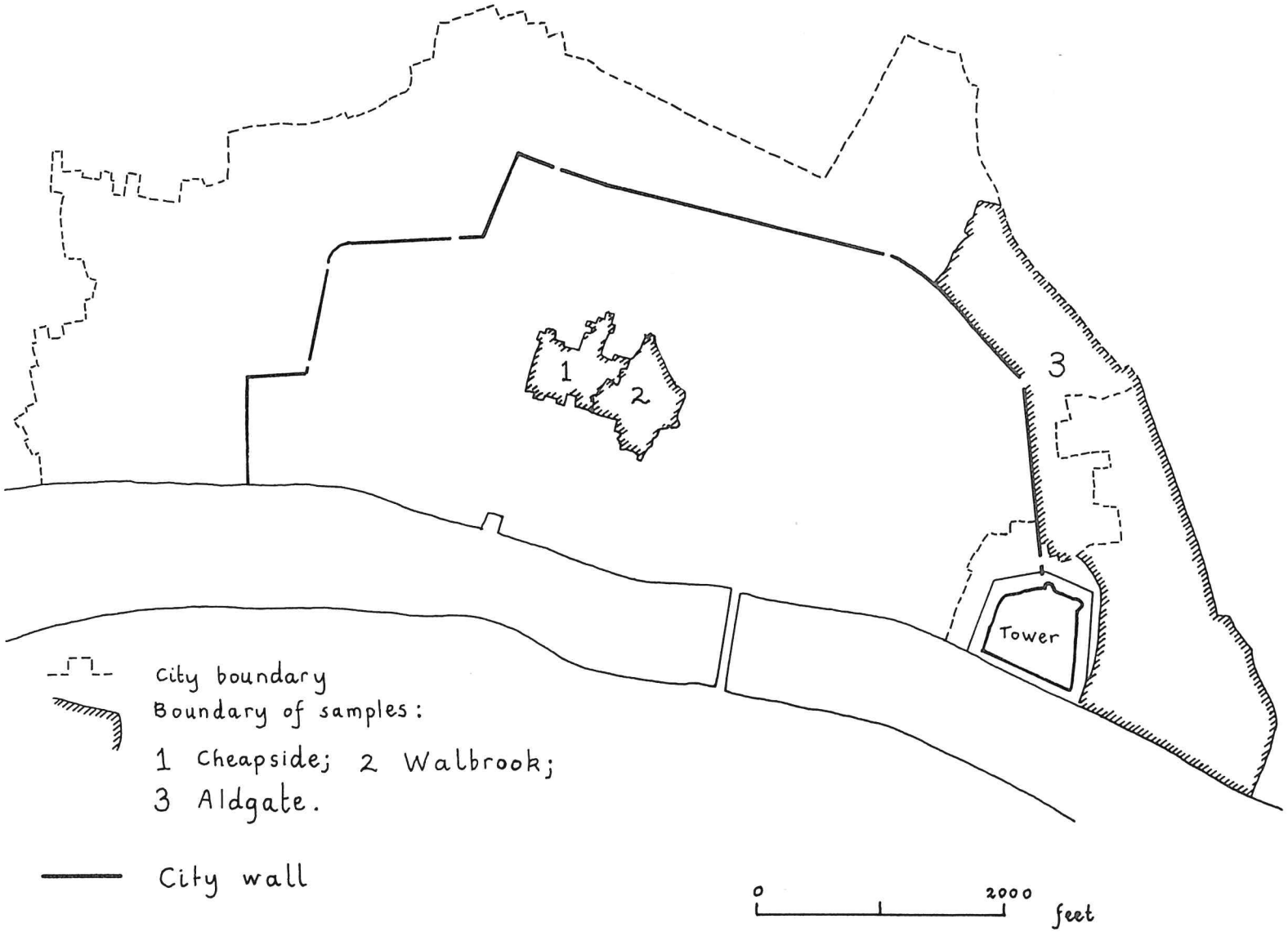

Fig. 1. The sample areas

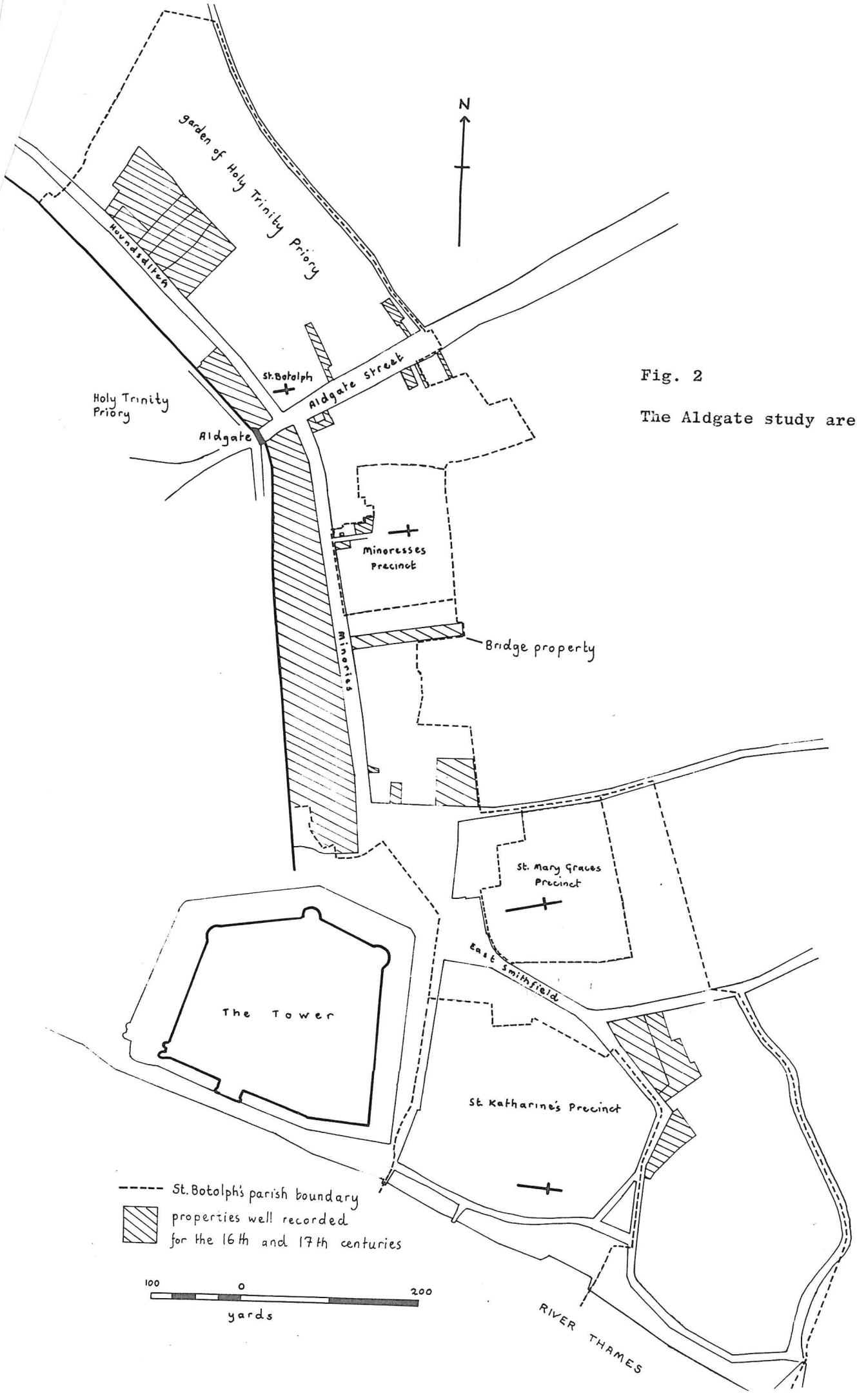

Fig. 2

The Aldgate study area

250 1280 1340 1380

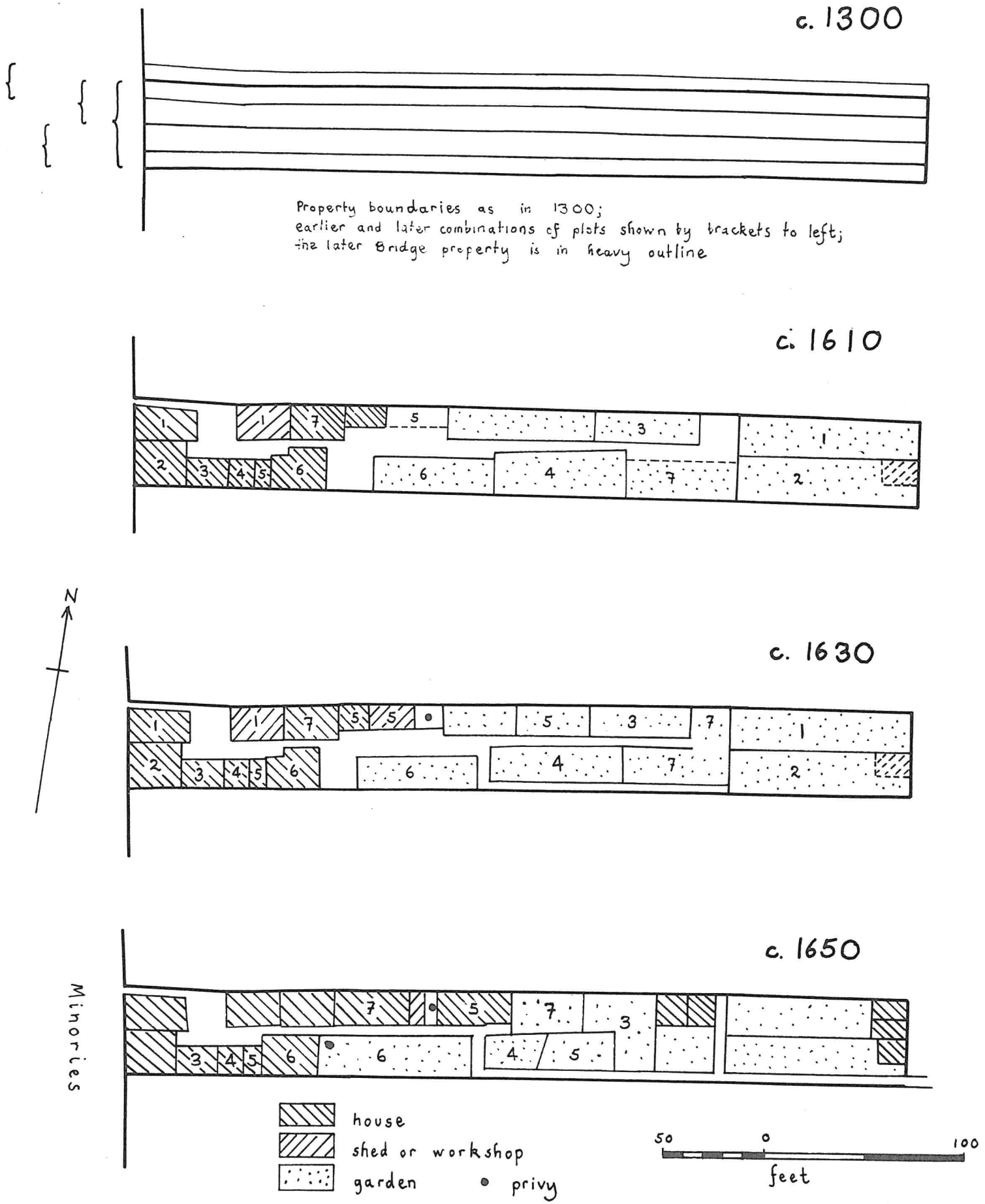

Fig. 3

The development of the Bridge property in Minories
For location, see Fig. 2. The numbers on plots indicate the holdings of single tenants

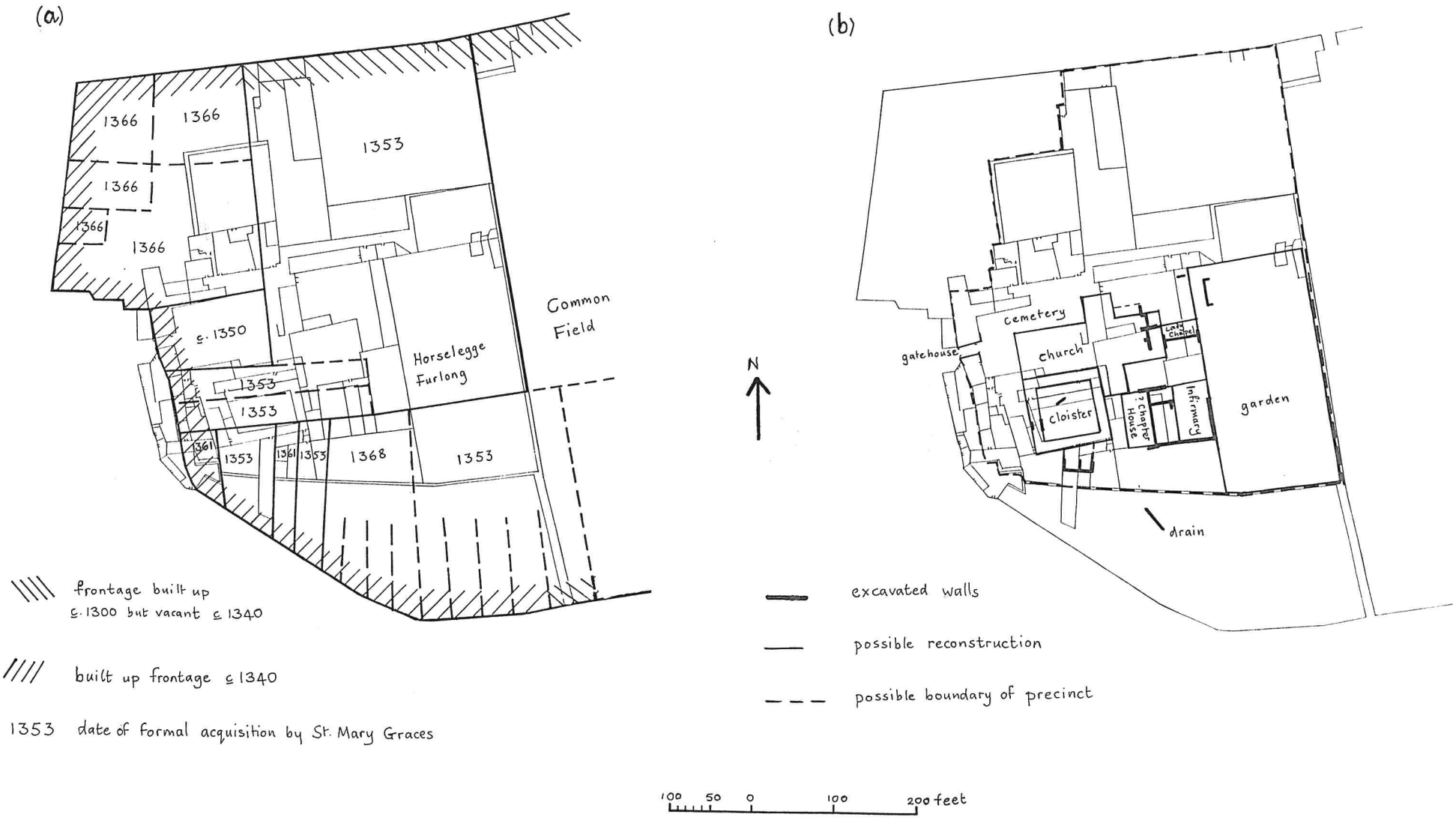

Fig. 4. The precinct of St. Mary Graces: (a) properties acquired to create the precinct; (b) reconstruction of the abbey plan showing walls revealed by excavation.
In each case the underlying outline shows the plan of the navy victualling houses derived from plans of c. 1630.