

The town walls of Leicester: evidence for a west wall

by John N. Lucas

There has always been uncertainty as to whether Leicester, in the Roman or Medieval period, had a town wall on its west side. Although the west gate is well documented there has been little evidence of a west wall. The earliest known map of Leicester, dated to around 1600 (HPB, 1583–6), although rather schematic does show a west wall (Plate 4), but Speed's map of 1610 (Plate 5) shows none of the town walls, only the Castle and the Newarke walls. As the town walls were described as 'ruinous' in 1587 (RBL III, 236) and in 1591 an order was made forbidding the removal of stone from the wall without permission of the common hall and upon payment of twenty shillings (RBL III, 271), it seems possible that Speed omitted the walls because they served no function and were derelict and slowly disappearing. With the walls in this state it may have been an arbitrary decision as to whether to put them on the town plan. Thus they were put on the earlier map although they may have only been in a slightly better condition than in 1611. Later maps post-date even the derelict wall, but where attempts have been made to show the line of the old town wall it has been shown on only three sides; for example, Stukeley's map of 1722, which shows the line of the Roman wall, and the reconstruction of Medieval Leicester (Billson 1920, 1). The information on which these maps were based is unknown. It might be possible that all trace of the west wall was removed earlier than the other walls thus giving rise to the erroneous assumption that a west wall never existed and that the River Soar formed a defensive barrier on this side.

More recent opinion, with the additional support of excavated evidence, generally accepts the position of the three walls and their identical alignment in the Roman and Medieval periods (Wacher, 1975, 351–3). Although the lack of evidence for a west wall is usually outlined, few have ventured an opinion on its existence. Haverfield (1918, 1) does state that a west wall probably existed in the Roman period and regarded the river as an inadequate defensive barrier. Also McWhirr's plan of Roman Leicester (A. E. Brown 1970, 13) shows two possible lines for a west wall. Most modern reconstructions, however, have continued to show only three walls, which is unfortunate for it gives the impression that there was definitely no west wall, and fails to reflect the uncertainty concerning its existence.

There is some physical evidence of a possible west wall. Between 1951 and 1953 building work uncovered four massive blocks of masonry beneath Russell's foundry on the west side of Bath Lane (Clarke 1952, 19; 1953, 79). They were found ten to fifteen metres from, and running parallel to, the canal, in an alignment over a distance of a hundred metres. Constructed of mortared Charnwood granite, one block was at least two metres wide, and another was over one and a quarter metres wide and two metres thick, resting on the natural gravels. The observer thought that there was little doubt that these foundations were the west wall (Clarke 1953, 79). A recent report (Harding 1979) has revealed that several years ago another large piece of masonry was found on the same alignment, running parallel to, and ten metres from, the canal. The wall, over one and a quarter metres wide was found immediately south of Russell's, below Harding's dye-works. None of this masonry has been dated and neither is it conclusive evidence for a west wall, but with the strong evidence that there was a west wall it is the prime candidate for that wall, especially as it is west of the Roman buildings which have been found quite close to the canal. (Mellor 1967–8, 60; 1969–70, 74).

This evidence can now be added to by a significant interpretation of documentary evidence from the Records of the Borough of Leicester. This research was instigated by G. A. Chinnery, Assistant Director (Human History), Leicestershire Museums, who did some preliminary work and brought the records to the writer's attention. These contain (RBL III, 335–340) a 'List of the tenements abutting on the town wall and dyke'. This list was compiled in 1492–3 upon the instructions of Edward, Lord Hastings and Sir John Digby, seemingly out of concern for the decaying of the town wall. It consists of an entry for each landholding on the wall, and states the name of each landholder, the length and breadth of the property, and whose property it adjoins. The first entry is a good example:

'In primis, John Roberts of Leycetter holdethe vpon the towne wall and dyke in lengthe xix^{xx}ix fotte and in bredth xlv fotte and buttith vpon the gronde of John Norrys'

The next entry is for John Norrys and in such a way a sequence of holdings around the wall is formed. It is not a continuous sequence for a few entries omit to state their neighbour and so instead there is a series of sequences. There are 77 entries, and together these show the full length of the town wall. An attempt was therefore made to see if this information could verify the generally accepted position of the town walls and reveal if there was a west wall. This was done not only by checking the overall length of the walls but also by trying to fit the entries into their correct positions on the wall.

As it was thought possible that some of the holdings might correspond with the later properties, the basic map used to plot the entries was the earliest accurate map that comprehensively recorded the property boundaries. This was the 1886 Ordnance Survey (1:500). Some entries gave a clear indication of their position on the wall; two entries adjoined the north gate, one the east gate, one was within the east gate and another was used as the town's butts. From these approximately known points, individual entries and hence complete sequences could be positioned on the wall and their position could be compared with the 1886 property boundaries. (Fig. 7).

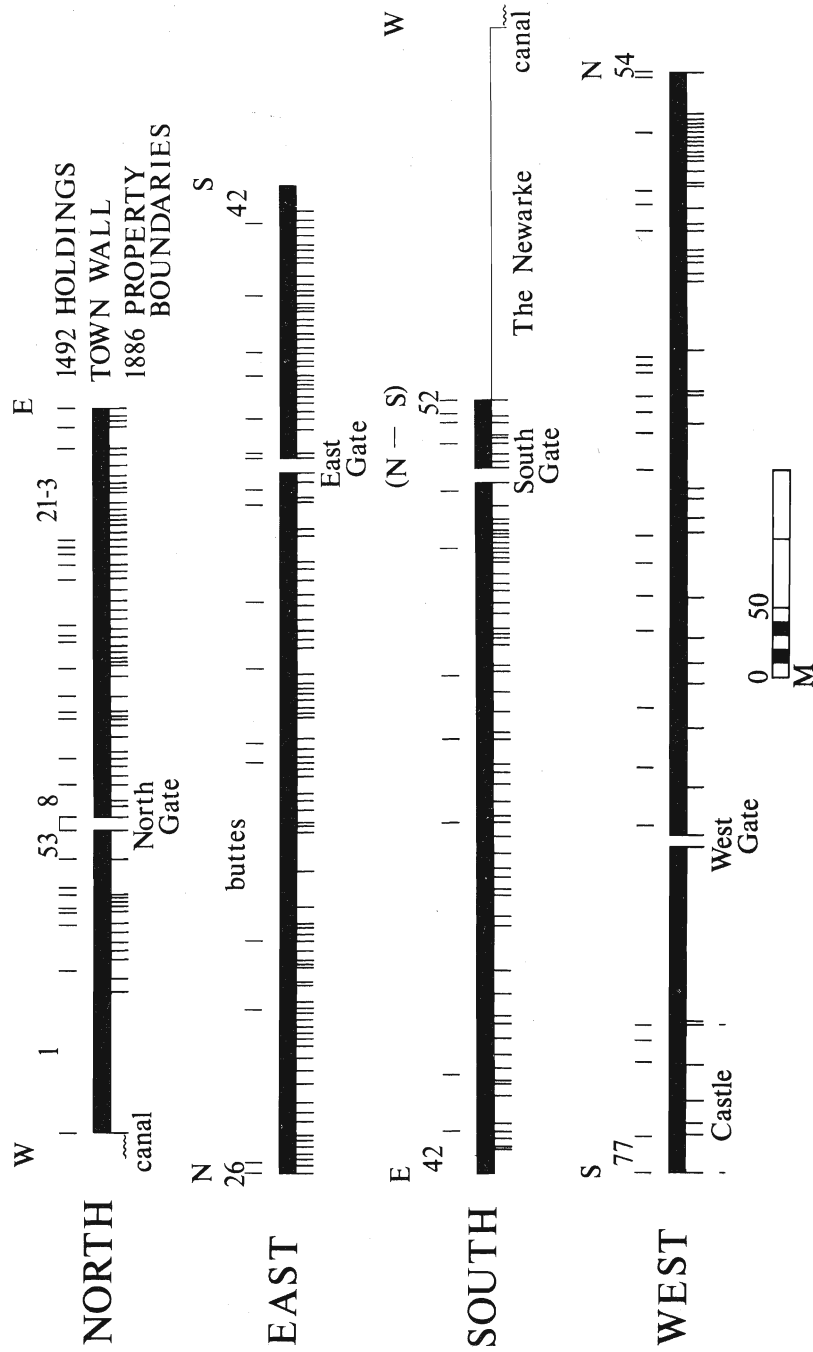


Fig. 7. The Four Town Walls showing a correlation between the 1492 survey and the 1886 Property Boundaries

The first 35 entries had a long sequence, numbers 25–34, which contained two known points, the butts and the east gate, and this, together with the sequence 12–19, which began at the north gate, set a regular pattern which suggested that all these entries formed a continuous sequence which started at the west end of the north wall, followed the north, then the east wall and finished at the east gate. Unfortunately entries 20–23 only gave the name of the tenants and so left a gap in the north wall of 66.25 m. Also a later entry, number 53, had to be fitted in as it abutted the north gate, but by doing so a better overall fit was obtained. The positioning of the entries was possibly verified by over two thirds of the 1492 property boundaries corresponding with the 1886 boundaries.

As it seemed probable that this first group of entries was in a continuous sequence it was then assumed that the next series of sequences, from 36–52, continued in the same pattern. These entries had no known points to tie them down, but by continuing the sequence from the east gate they exactly fitted the distance along the east, then the south wall, to the south gate and then from the south gate to the entrance to the Newarke. Such a remarkable fit was supported by the coincidence of over two thirds of the property boundaries.

Thus the entries 1–52, together with the out of sequence 53, showed a quite precise fit with north, east and south walls. As the Newarke defences were not included in the survey, then just the west wall, running from the west end of the north wall to the west end of the Newarke walls, was left. The rest of the entries formed two large sequences, from 54–73 and from 74–77. Their overall length is exactly the length required for a west wall. The precise way in which they fill in this gap must be much more than a coincidence, and seems to be very strong evidence for there being a west wall. Unfortunately because entry 53 breaks the initial sequence it is difficult to say from which end of the west wall these last two sequences start. Under a third of the property boundaries coincide either way, but if the sequence starts from the north then the second sequence, from 74–77, very neatly fits along the edge of the Castle between two parish boundaries.

Even though this positioning of each entry may not be correct and is open to further re-interpretation, the overall picture leads to the conclusion that unless the survey is very inaccurate, which seems unlikely, as the distances between the known points fit in very well, then in the Medieval period at least, the town had a west wall. As the Roman wall almost certainly coincided with the Medieval wall on the other three sides, it also seems quite possible that the Roman town had a west wall on the same line. It also seems possible that the large foundations found to the west of Bath Lane could have been part of the town wall. It is interesting to note that the distance between these walls and the canal is equal to the width of the property holdings in the 1492–3 survey. Within this area lay the town ditch. As the canal is a canalised river, and a *circa* 1600 map describes this stretch of water as being a 'new cut', it seems possible that some kind of water course ran parallel to the ditch. The size of this watercourse prior to the undated new cut is unknown, and it is this lack of knowledge that prevents a full picture of the western defences being drawn.

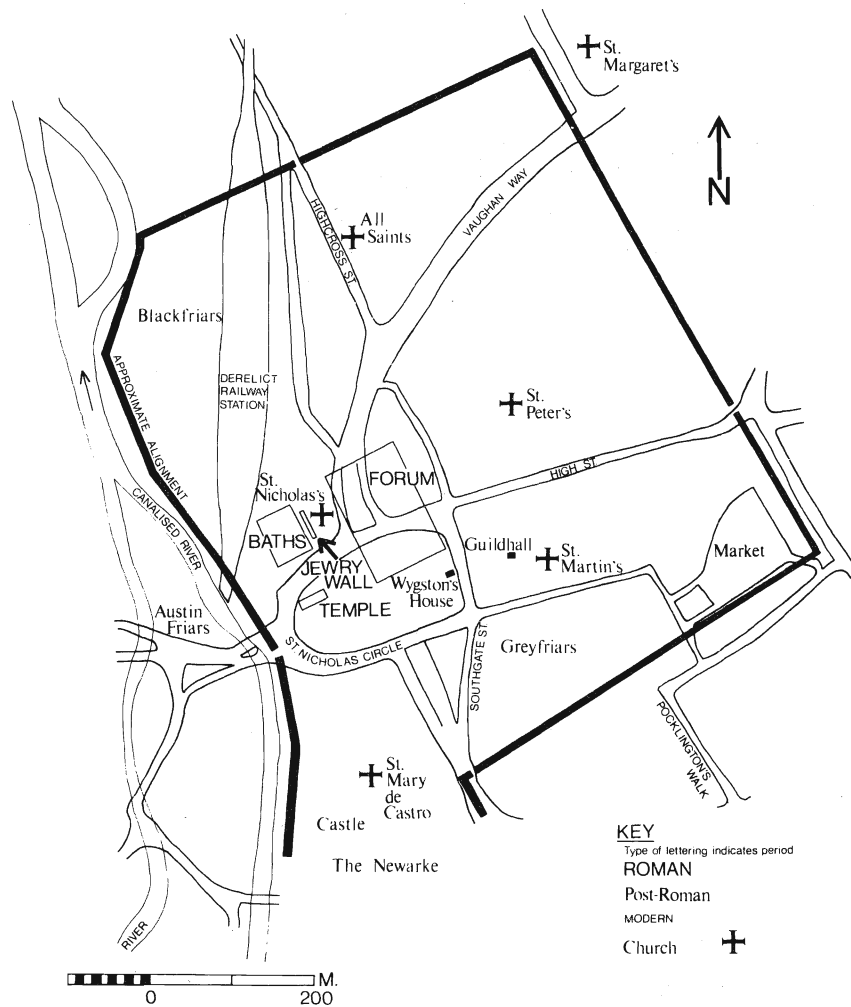


Fig. 8. The Town Walls of Leicester

The success of this survey in pulling together various threads to build a strong argument for the existence of a west wall has, subsequent to its completion, been reinforced by the discovery of explicit references to it. A recent examination of the Leicester Corporation Deeds by T. Pearce, Assistant Field Archæologist, Leicestershire Museums, has revealed three references to the town wall and ditch near the west gate (LCD 557, 630 and 703) in the years 1592, 1594–5 and 1598. One of these refers to the town wall adjacent to Baldwin Lane, which is now the south end of Bath Lane and another states that the town wall and ditch is on the ground called the Waterlagge, which is now the central part of the Bath Lane. As Bath Lane

runs close to the canal on the west side of the town, these references clearly show that there is both a town wall and ditch on the west side of the medieval town. Thus the strong inference that there was a west wall can now be more solidly grounded. Additionally the same source has revealed a sudden burst of activity in the late sixteenth century concerning leases of properties on the town wall and ditch, and as many of these have tenements, crofts and other buildings on them (LCD, 1591–5) this supports the theory of the growing dereliction of the town defences at this time to the extent that they were no longer regarded as part of the fabric of the town, and hence were omitted from Speed's map of 1610.

Although the existence of a west wall now seems certain, its exact position can only be approximated (Fig. 8). It is not absolutely proven that the foundations located west of Bath Lane are those of the town wall. These walls could be part of structures lying besides the river and outside the town wall. It is worth noting the dramatic change in levels between Talbot Lane and Bath Lane. Although there is a natural fall away to the river here, this could have been accentuated by the existence of a west wall. A similar fall in ground level occurs along the known line of the town wall in Sanvey Gate and Churchgate. It is hoped that future excavations will resolve this problem, but this may not be possible, for, particularly to the west of Bath Lane, industrial development has destroyed much of the evidence.

Acknowledgements

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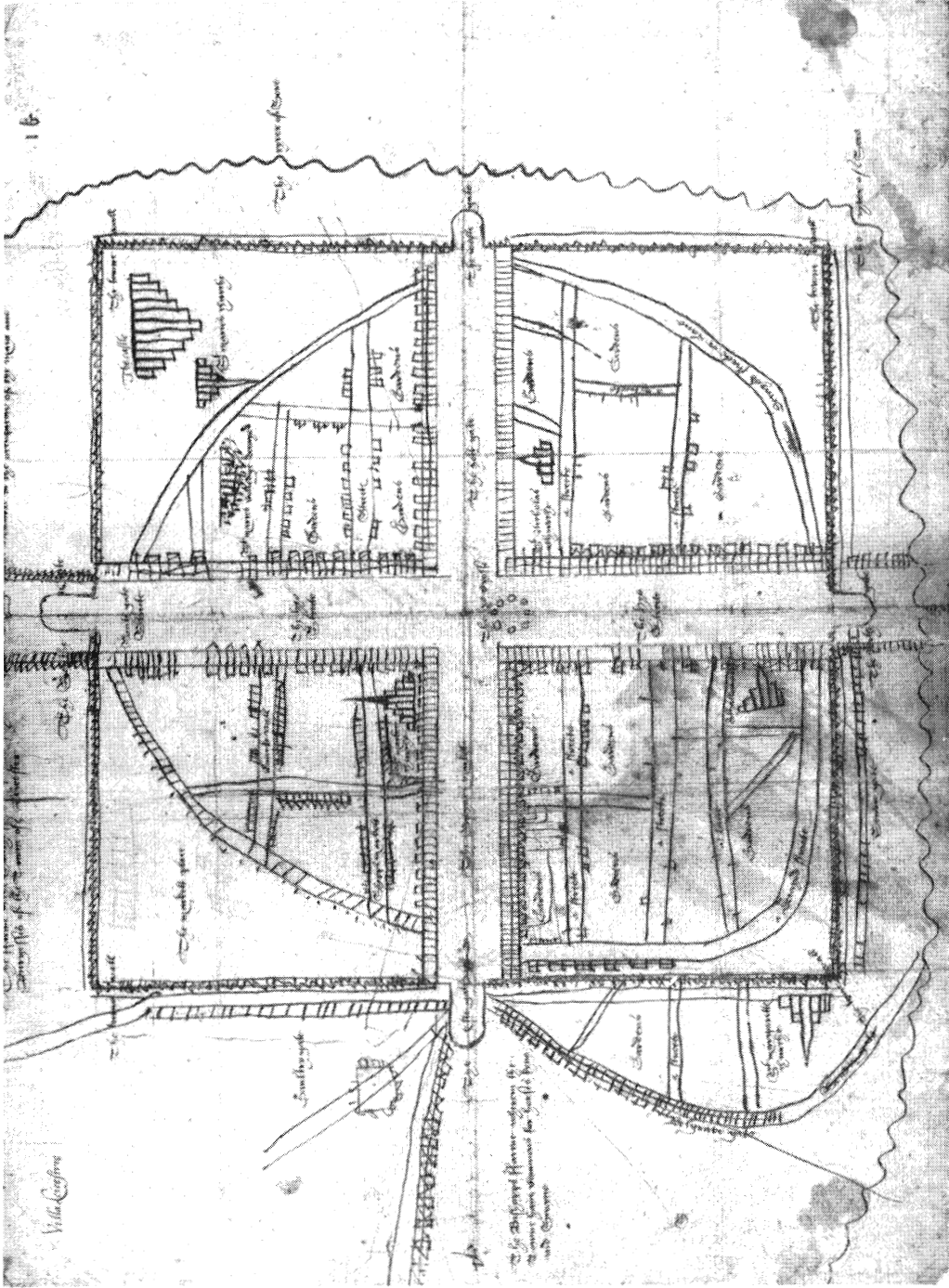


PLATE 4
 The earliest known map of Leicester, circa 1600

