

# COLONISATION BY THE WEALTHY: THE CASE OF MEDIEVAL SOUTHAMPTON

By COLIN PLATT

AMONG those aspects of settlement less frequently discussed is the colonisation of poor neighbourhoods by the relatively wealthy, now recognised as a phenomenon of the contemporary London scene but as likely to have been a characteristic of much earlier stages of the English urbanising process. One such instance, in medieval Southampton, was the movement of the wealthier burgesses from the northern and western parishes, All Saints and St. Michael with St. John, to the ancient southern parish of Holy Rood. The circumstances of this move, determined by many different factors and evidenced in both the history and the archaeology of the town, may repay closer examination.

At Southampton, the survival of the regular street pattern of the medieval town, with its clear suggestion of a grid-type lay-out, has been taken by at least two recent commentators as evidence of deliberate planning in the remote past (Biddle and Hill 1971, 84). Yet this is hardly likely to have been the case. When the men of Anglo-Saxon *Hamton*, now St. Mary's, moved their settlement from the original low-lying situation by the Itchen, they took it to a healthier and more defensible site on the well-drained gravel ridge to the west (Fig. 14). Almost inevitably, they ran their highway down the crown of the ridge to the sea, forming the central axis of the new town, and it was this highway, the 'great street of Hamton' later commonly known as 'English Street', that determined the direction of subsequent development. Of the three earliest churches on the new site – All Saints to the north, St. Lawrence in the centre, and Holy Rood to the south – all were placed on the line of English Street, into which Holy Rood originally intruded. At either end of the street, in the parishes of All Saints and Holy Rood, there is good archaeological evidence of intensive Anglo-Saxon settlement, substantially pre-dating the Conquest (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1974).

With the arrival of the Normans, in or shortly after 1066, a new factor entered Southampton's growth. While there is little direct evidence either of the timing or the nature of Norman settlement in the town, we at least know that by 1086, at the Domesday survey, the established Anglo-Saxon burgesses of pre-Conquest days had been joined by 65 co-burgesses of French origin and by another 31 English-born (Moody 1862, 26–7, 58). Understandably, the French chose to settle together in a distinct neighbourhood of their own. For this, they selected the south-west corner of the gravel peninsula, very probably displacing such Anglo-Saxons as had already made their homes there. By the mid-twelfth century, if not before, this quarter was protected by the bulk of the royal castle immediately to the north; it had been equipped with two parish churches bearing French dedications, the greater to St. Michael, patron saint of Normandy, and the lesser to St. John; of its two principal thoroughfares, running parallel to English Street and the waterfront, one was known as 'French Street'.

Through the twelfth and into the thirteenth centuries, it would have been natural enough for the rich to cluster in the French quarter of Southampton, in the parishes of St. Michael and St. John. And this they seem to have done. Very probably, that is,

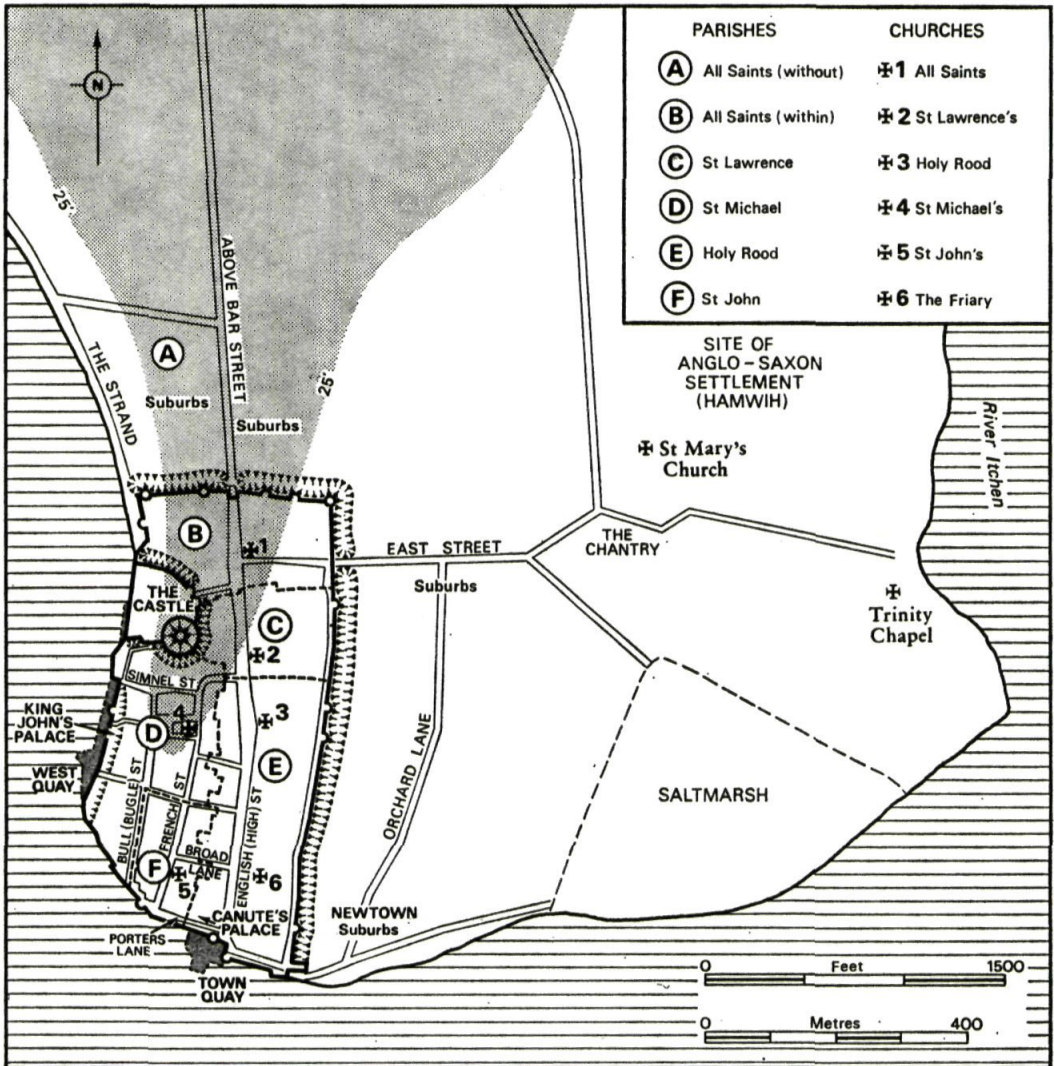


Fig. 14. The parishes of medieval Southampton, the higher land being shaded (Cartographic Unit, Southampton University).

it was in the 'French street (*vicus*) known as the Bull Street' that the influential twelfth-century Veal family had its principal tenements, for a message called 'Domus le Veel' is recorded at Bull Street in a quitclaim of 1236 (God's House Deeds 506). Bull Street itself may have taken its name from the mansion known as 'la Bulehuse'. And it was close to this, certainly, at the southern end of Bull Street towards the sea, that Gervase le Riche, the wealthiest burghess of the late-twelfth-century town, chose to build West Hall. Within a very few years, we know, there were many substantial stone-built

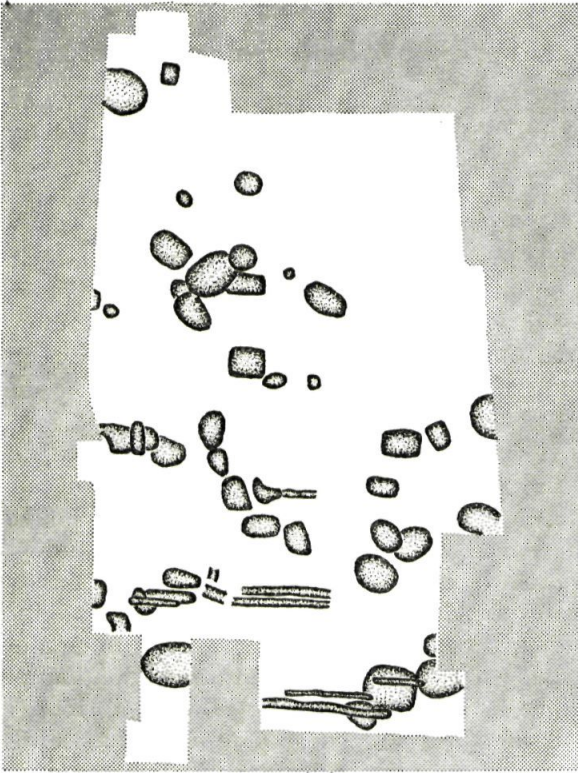
houses in the vicinity of these early mansions. Before 1221, Richard of Leicester had built his 'great stone houses' on French Street, close to West Hall (St. Denys Cartulary 251-3). Master Roger, brother of Gervase, was to put up two stone houses of his own and to buy another two. His contemporaries, Roger de Tankerville, John de la Bulehuse and the young Walter le Fleming, each lived in stone-built houses (God's House Deeds 313). Two such houses, both datable to the late-twelfth century, survive largely intact to this day. They have acquired antiquarian labels as the houses, or 'palaces', of King John and King Canute, with neither of whom, of course, they had anything to do. One of them is in St. Michael's parish, behind the present Tudor House Museum; the other is on Porters Lane, at the southern tip of Holy Rood parish, adjoining the parish boundary of St. John's.

The rebuilding of Southampton in stone, beginning in the wealthier quarters before the end of the twelfth century, was the result of more than just a change in fashion. It may be true that the burgesses of Southampton had done well enough already on the cross-Channel trade to Normandy and on the export of wool to Flanders, both of which are likely to have been boosted by the Conquest. But the real expansion of Southampton's overseas trade probably occurred rather later. In 1154, on the accession of the Angevin Henry II, new markets opened to English trade throughout central and south-western France. Henry himself was a frequent visitor at Southampton, and the port took advantage of his interest. Then, between 1203 and 1206, Henry's Angevin empire collapsed. In a succession of disastrous campaigns, John lost his paternal fiefs in Normandy, Maine and Anjou; Brittany fell to the French crown in 1206. Yet for Southampton the effect of these reverses was very far from the calamity they may originally have seemed. Just as long as the English king had held the best part of both sides of the Narrow Seas, his control of the water in between had been unchallenged. Southampton, while this remained so, had shared the rich southern trade with many ports on the Kentish and East Anglian coasts. After 1206, the Channel passage would become very much more hazardous. Important land routes from London and the Cotswolds converged on Southampton. It could not fail to profit from the change.

John's misfortunes had other consequences. Already, in 1202, the outbreak of war with France had encouraged John to grant the men of Southampton £100 out of their farm 'to close their town'. By 1220, or thereabouts, the ramparts and ditches to the north and the east, although imperfect, were complete. This new definition of the town within its defences, and the wealth it drew increasingly from the rich Gascon wine trade to the south, promoted social change. Those who had lived beyond the ramparts in what was to become known as 'All Saints Without', were persuaded to move within them. The fashionable parishes in the south-west quarter, already crowded, were too small to hold all who wanted, and could afford, to live there. Only in the ancient 'English' parish of Holy Rood could the rich and the displaced be accommodated. By the fourteenth century, it was Holy Rood that had taken the place of St. Michael's and St. John's as the most popular residential quarter for the wealthy. No prominent Southampton burgess, after the first decades of the thirteenth century, chose to reside in the suburbs (Platt 1973).

In the archaeology of medieval Southampton these movements, once understood,

A.D. 1000~1200



SOUTHAMPTON  
HIGH STREET  
Sites A~C  
1967~69

A.D. 1200~1350

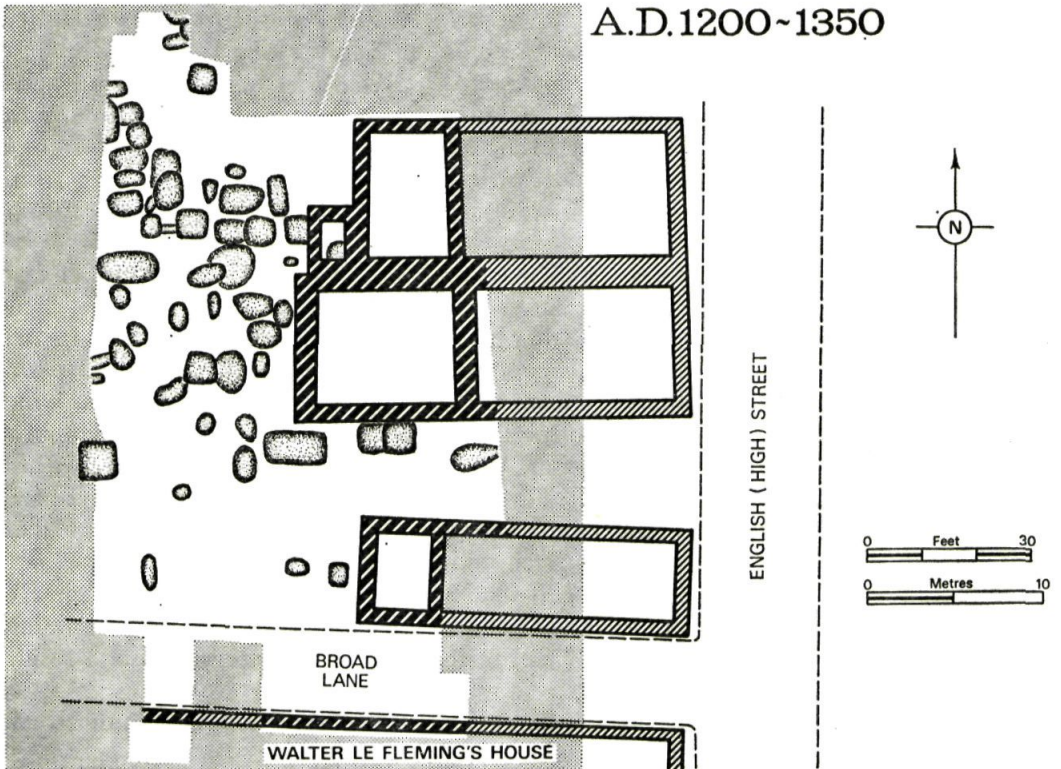


Fig. 15. Thirteenth-century stone-built tenements and backyard pits on the High Street site, Southampton, with a plan of the underlying pits and beam-slots, datable to the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Cartographic Unit, Southampton University).

are easy enough to recognise. North of the Bargate and west of Above Bar Street, an important twelfth-century tenement, excavated by Mr. John Wachter in the late 'fifties, was shown to have gone out of use at approximately the same time as the defences themselves were inserted. Its site, turned over to gardens, was not again developed as building land for many centuries. At the other end of the town, in Holy Rood parish, building on a new and substantial scale was only just beginning. Thirteenth-century stone-built tenements, closely dated by associated pits, characterised the large site on English Street, now the High Street, excavated in 1967-9 (Fig. 15). They were found to overlie timber structures, datable to the twelfth century and before, of a very different building technique and scale. On the southern edge of the site, Broad Lane had clearly been inserted to serve the new stone tenements. It, too, overlay twelfth-century rubbish pits and structures, the latest feature it sealed being a smithy floor datable to the early thirteenth century.

There were other changes observable on this and neighbouring sites. The shifting trading emphasis of the town, from Normandy to the wine-producing areas round Bordeaux, was reflected in the character of the pottery. In the thirteenth century, Norman imports, although not altogether displaced, became rare, and it was more usual for the finer imported wares to derive from Saintonge, just to the north of Bordeaux. At the same time specialisation in the booming Gascon wine trade encouraged the development of a new urban sophistication. Whereas butchery, on the evidence of bone deposits, had been practised throughout the twelfth-century town, in the thirteenth century it was restricted to the markets. On the High Street site, the large joints or whole carcasses suggested by twelfth-century bone assemblages are replaced in the thirteenth century by much smaller joints and by a markedly wider selection of meats. The bones of sheep, goats, pigs and horses are recognisable in both periods, but to these are added in the thirteenth century rabbit and a generous range of poultry and wildfowl. More veal and more sucking pig were eaten (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1974).

The implications of the High Street evidence are plain. Within a short space of time, at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a relatively poor area, characterised by scattered timber cottages and large open yards, had been transformed into a quarter fit for the wealthy. In a process that remains historically obscure, the re-development of Holy Rood was complete. Earlier properties had been swept away, their boundaries ignored in a comprehensive re-planning of the entire quarter, which included the laying-out of tenement plots and the insertion of new service lanes. To put it another way, a society that was still semi-rural in its habits had become wholly urban. The comfortably-off Southampton burgesses who developed their new plots on the High Street and Broad Lane were specialist traders. They would have had no use for the mixture of agriculture and craftsmanship that had sustained their predecessors on the same sites. Nothing, in later generations, would match the early-thirteenth-century smithy floor sealed by the newly-inserted Broad Lane. The bone-working industry, for which there is good evidence on the Holy Rood sites before 1200, was not to be found there after it. In the restricted yards of the closely-packed thirteenth-century tenements, livestock no longer had a place, and if not kept there would not be killed there either. Meat would be bought at the butchers' shambles, and fruit and vegetables

at the market. In a contrast that is surely significant, a typical twelfth-century pit, analysed for its botanical content, could show nothing better than the seeds of elder and of nettle; its equivalents of a hundred years later would hold the remains of grape and fig, of raspberry, strawberry, sloe, cherry and plum, of hazel-nut and walnut (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1974).

While it is difficult to see just how this migration of the wealthy was achieved, and impossible to do more than guess at what happened to the families it displaced, there can be no doubt that it struck deep and permanent roots. One reason for its success must have been the rank and standing of the men who effected it. Already, that is, in the first decades of the thirteenth century, the great Walter le Fleming had chosen the parish for his residence. The most influential burgess of his generation and founder of a long-lasting line, Walter built himself an imposing stone tenement immediately south of Broad Lane, fronting on English Street. It was probably Walter who negotiated the placing of the new Franciscan friary in Holy Rood, on the other side of English Street, opposite his own great mansion. And it was surely the example of Walter and his kind that tempted their fellow burgesses to settle in the parish. Certainly, Walter's capital message and the group of tenements immediately to the south continued over many generations to house the merchant plutocracy of the town. Early in the fourteenth century, Henry de Lym, at the Broad Lane corner tenement, had Nicholas de Moundenard, Roger Norman and Thomas de Byndon as neighbours and near-neighbours to the south. A century later, these same tenements were the property of Peter James, Walter Fetplace 'senior' and William Soper (Platt 1973).

Such continued clustering of the wealthy at the southern end of English Street was no historical accident. An important consequence of the French raid of 1338 was to be the completion, rather later in the century, of the seaward defences of the town. As access to the waterfront was closed, some of the richest quayside residences in the parish of St. Michael went finally out of use. Congestion at the West Quay increased, and in 1410 Thomas Middleton completed a new quay, later to be known as the Town Quay, backing on English Street where the royal custom house was also to be sited in due course. When, in 1454, a list was drawn up of all the properties within the walls liable for defence charges, there were already more capital tenements in Holy Rood parish than in St. Michael's and St. John's put together (Burgess 1974). Of the fifteenth-century burgesses whose residence we know, exactly twice as many lived in Holy Rood as in the other two parishes, and the marked concentration of wealth in Holy Rood parish is plainly apparent again in the informative subsidy returns of 1524 (Public Record Office, E179/173/175). It is not to be supposed that this emphasis was swift to change. One of the features of Southampton that particularly impressed Lieutenant Hammond, when he visited the port in 1635, was the magnificent sweep of its High Street. There, on the former English Street, the 'Buildings both within and without, I meane the Fabrickes, and Inhabitants, are fayre, neat, beautifull, streight and handsome' (Douch 1961, 9-10). They had come a long way since the twelfth century.

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