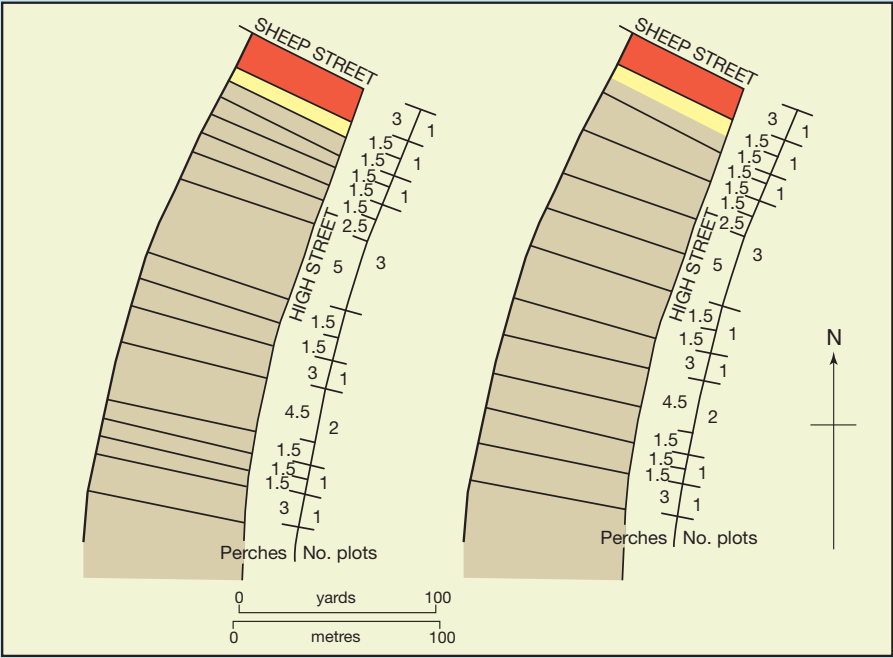


# Reconstructing Medieval Towns

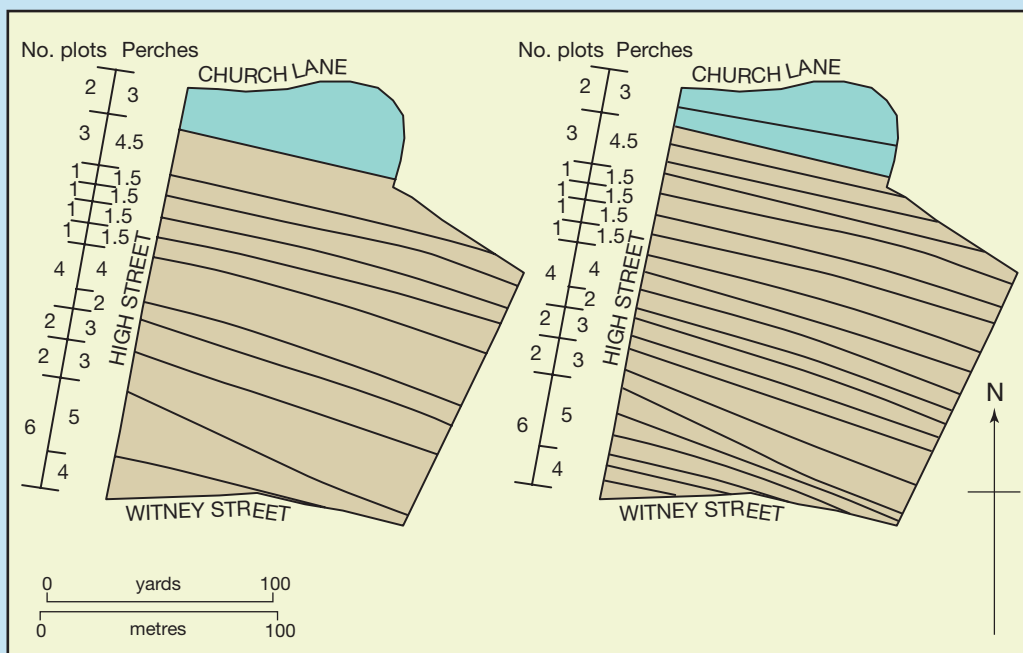


Nos. 128-132 (coloured red on the plan) still fill a complete 3-perch burgage plot. No. 134 next door (coloured yellow) was recorded as a half-burgage c.1250.

Town-plan analysis relies on the fact that the property boundaries which define urban house-plots (usually known as *burgages* in medieval towns) are extremely conservative and change very slowly. Thus, while ownership of a burgage plot might change through inheritance and purchase, and while it might be subdivided or otherwise developed by various owners, its original, primary boundaries are unlikely to alter. This is due partly to the difficulties of moving boundaries in a built-up area without modern construction machinery, and partly to the legal rights associated with burgage tenure. Excavations in cities such as York and Southampton have shown that some plot boundaries survived unchanged for a millennium or more, carefully marked out using hedges, fences or walls.

Through examination of a town plan, therefore, the original dimensions of the burgages in various areas

of a town can be determined. This involves measuring the width of each building in a plot-series to the nearest foot, with separate measurements taken for the gaps created by alleyways and post-medieval roads. The measurements are recorded onto a modern large-scale plan of the town, and analysed to see whether the distances between the primary boundaries form multiples or fractions of the statute perch of 16½ft (5.03m) – since studies have shown that burgages in planned towns were laid out according to standard measurements based on the perch. From this, it is possible to recreate the original plot-boundaries in any plan unit. At Burford, the earliest (11th- or 12th-century) plots were 1½ perches wide and between 22 and 28 perches deep (7.5 x 110-140m), while those laid out in the later 12th century were three perches wide and 14-19 perches deep (15 x 76-90m). This shows that



No. 33 High Street (coloured green on the plan) straddles two original 1½-perch plots.

Burgage plots along High Street, running south from Sheep Street (opposite page), and between Church Lane and Witney Street (above). Modern boundaries are shown on the left, and reconstructed medieval plots on the right.

The numbers show (a) the modern frontage measurement in perches, and (b) the number of medieval burgage plots which would originally have fitted into these spaces.

In the stretch shown opposite, medieval plots were three perches wide. South of Church Lane (above) they were 1½ perches.

there was a distinct and deliberate difference between the shapes of plots laid out in different periods.

In most towns, the pattern of medieval burgages was changed almost as soon as they were laid out to suit the needs of the inhabitants. At Burford it is still possible to find plots which have retained their original dimensions, as at Nos. 170-172, 188-192 and 139 High Street, all of which retain the three-perch frontage of the late 12th-century plots. However, sub-division and amalgamation of plots was common, resulting in properties such as 134 High Street (which occupies half the original three-perch plot), or 91 High Street (where the surviving five-bay medieval house has a frontage of 11m or 37ft, indicating that it was built on a site comprising one-and-a-half plots of 1½ perches each).

Analysing urban plots shows the care taken by the medieval urban planner in laying out a new town. The

plots did not form areas of irregular development, but ranged along the main street frontages in a regular and ordered pattern. They did not come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but adhered to statute measurements on a scale that allowed speculative development by burgage holders, through sub-division and subletting. In addition, the wealthy could display their status through the construction of impressive houses occupying several adjoining plots.