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Arthur's Acre: a Saxon bridgehead at Bristol

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By ROGER H. LEECH

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An enigmatic rental copied into the Little Red Book of Bristol and dated by its editor to the 14th century has much to tell us, not only about the topography of Bristol in the 14th century, but also about the origins of the city itself. The 'rentale de feodo Arthur et Stakepeny'¹ provides us with a street directory of the area immediately to the south of Bristol bridge, listing each house together with those that it abuts. A translation of the text is appended (Appendix) and also a map (Fig. 1). The purpose of this paper is to identify the streets listed in that rental and then to look at other evidence for Arthur's Fee, or Arthur's Acre as the area is subsequently described. It will be argued that Arthur's Acre is the vestige of an enclosed urban settlement that protected the southern approaches to the bridge that gave Bristol its name.

The Fee of Arthur was certainly an area of lordship *c.*1285. The responses then to Kirby's Quest,² the inquiry into debts, dues and rents owing to the Crown conducted by the officials of the exchequer for Robert Kirby, Treasurer to Edward I, stated that Richard Arthur held by baronial tenure 'that part of Redcliff Street known as Arthur's Acre extending from the tenement that was of Roysie Sowe as far as la Lawdich in vico Fullonum'. The remaining part of the 'vicus fullonum' was probably that held by Thomas of Berkeley.³

The rental (Appendix) commences with the *Vico fullonum*, the street of the fullers, listing or enabling us to identify 13 properties before arriving at *Toukarestret*, identified here as Tucker Street. It then proceeds via a further five properties to arrive at a single property in *Vico Sancti Thome*, or St Thomas Street, proceeding from there to a property in *Redeclyvstreet*, or Redcliff Street. Twelve properties in Redcliff Street can be identified, the last explicitly stated to be in the *vico de Redeclive*, as if to enable the reader to know where the rental has terminated. From these entries, the sequence of Tucker Street, St Thomas Street and Redcliff Street, it will be clear that the walking order of the rental was from east to west and to the south of the river Avon. From the identification of later property boundaries, known from research elsewhere to be long-lived in the urban landscape, it is clear that the street of the fullers, with which the rental commences, was the name for the east part of Tucker Street, as first shown in map form by James Millerd in 1673 (Fig. 2). The rental thus enables the identification of about 18 properties along the entire length of Tucker Street. The one property listed as being in St Thomas Street is likely then to have been opposite the south end of the bridge at the corner with Redcliff Street, a location much

1. *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. F.B. Bickley (2 vols. Bristol and London, 1900), I, 7–9.

2. M. Prestwich, *Edward I* (London, 1988), 234–8.

3. *The Great Red Book of Bristol: Text (Part 1)*, ed. E.W.W. Veale (Bristol Record Society 4, 1933), 3–4, 100, see also 107.

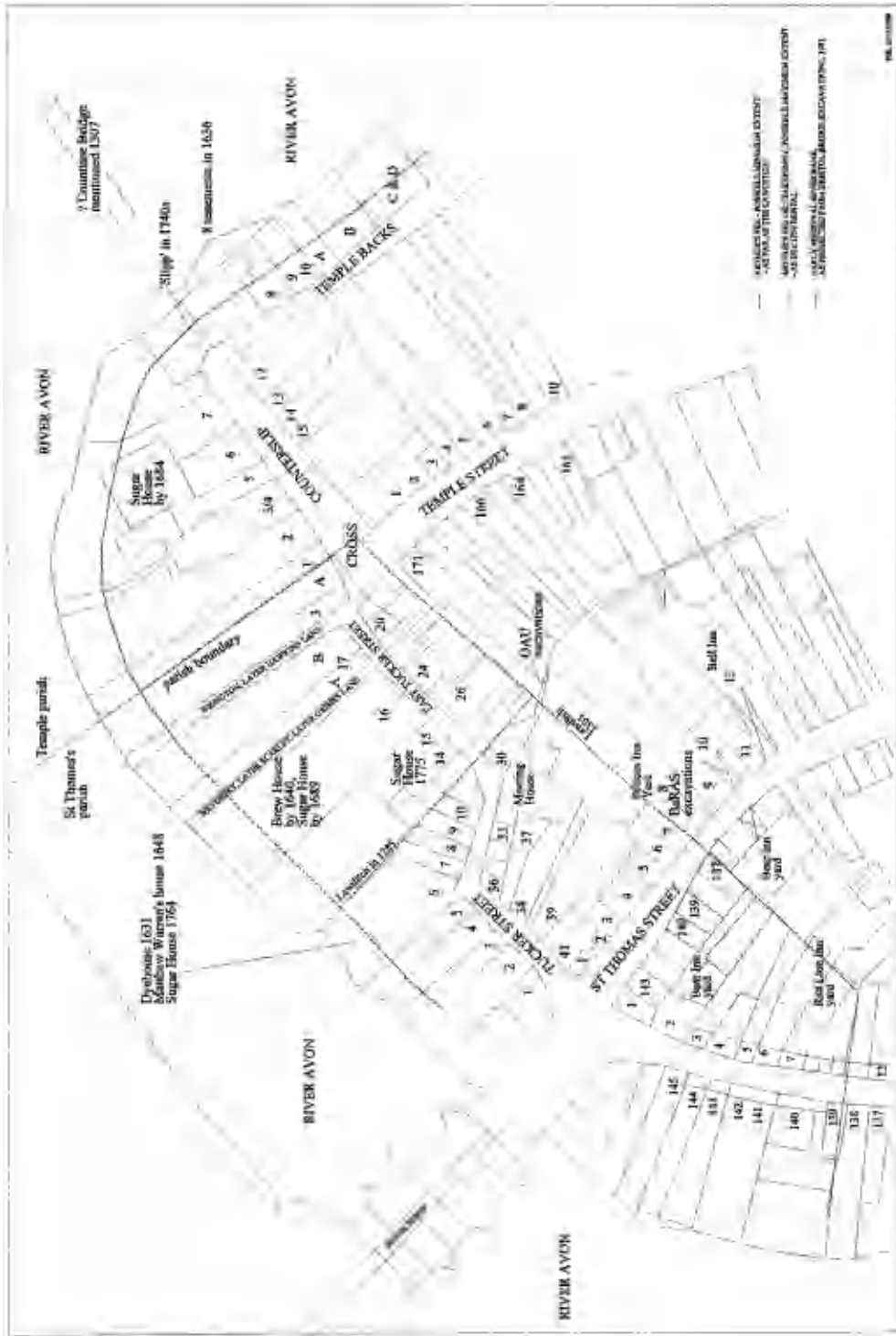


Fig. 1. Plan of Arthur's Fee with the basic topography taken from Ordnance Survey maps of 1884. The tenement boundaries are plotted as for a forthcoming Bristol Record Society volume.

altered with the construction of the new Bristol bridge in 1750; a further 11 properties (and an additional one the presence of which can be inferred) were then listed in Redcliff Street before the completion of the rental.

Having identified the route taken by the compiler of the rental, and from that the location of the properties described, it can be argued, from the evidence within three medieval deeds referring to properties within the Fee of Arthur, that the properties listed in these streets were all on the side away from the river.

The first deed to be considered is a grant of 1301 to William Randulf, burgess, of a tenement with the buildings thereon in the suburb of Bristol in the street of the fullers, *of the Fee of Arthur* [my italics], between the land formerly of John of Whitchurch and land formerly of William Crespi, and extending from the said street in front to the Law Ditch behind, with an annual landgable rent of 8d.⁴ From the description in the deed and from the much later deeds of properties in St Thomas Street granted to the Company of Tailors, it can be argued that the tenement was in the Fee of Arthur and on the east side of St Thomas Street, extending back from Tucker Street on the site of the later Lamb inn at the corner of Tucker Street and St Thomas Street. The inn was in the ownership of the Company of Tailors, in whose muniments the deed of 1301 was formerly located. In 1517 'le Lambe' with a void place was described as being in West Tucker Street, between a tenement of the Fraternity of St John the Baptist (another name for the Company of Tailors) and a lane leading to St Thomas Street. In 1553 two tenements called the Lamb were leased for 99 years to Henry Leeke and his wife Joan his wife and in 1574 the Lamb in St Thomas Street, then or late of Henry Leeke, was described as extending to Tucker Street.⁵ By 1576 it was in the tenure of Thomas More, by 1602 in that of Alice Locke,⁶ and by 1630 it was then or late of William Thrupp vintner.⁷

In 1678 a lease of the Lamb inn for 75 years was purchased by Bristol corporation for its first street improvement scheme. At the north end of St Thomas Street the narrow defile known as Leaden Walls with houses owned by the Tailors' Company was widened by 8 ft and the street was extended northwards to the bridge. On the completion of the scheme new and other dwellings were relet at a profit.⁸ The configuration of St Thomas Street prior to its widening is shown on Millerd's map of 1673 (Fig. 2), matching the description given in the deed of purchase in 1678.⁹ The Lamb Inn can thus be identified as the property running back from Tucker Street on the north, causing St Thomas Street to be narrower at this point. According to Millerd the property had its own distinct southern boundary, the location of which will be later argued to be of some significance. The property adjacent and to the east of the Lamb must have remained in the possession of the Company of Tailors, being part of its property in the later 18th century and remaining in its ownership until c.1868 when sold for the building of Victoria Street. With the demolition of the Lamb c.1678 this property fronted on to St Thomas Street, south of the junction with Tucker Street.

The second deed enabling the more precise identification of the location of a property in the Fee of Arthur is a grant of 1409. By it a tenement and three shops, late of Arthur's Fee and held of the corporation, formed part of the endowment of Robert Chepe's chantry in St Thomas's

4. Bristol Record Office (BRO), 11374(5).

5. F.F. Fox, *Some Account of the Ancient Fraternity of Merchant Taylors of Bristol* (Bristol, 1880), 113–16.

6. The National Archives, E 310/14/52.

7. T.J. Manchee, *The Bristol Charities* (2 vols. Bristol, 1831), I, 209.

8. J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century* (Bristol, 1900), 388–9.

9. BRO, 00947(8).



Fig. 2. Detail from James Millerd's *An Exact Delineation of the Famous Cittie of Bristol* (1673) showing the narrowing of St Thomas Street at Leaden Walls.

church.¹⁰ In 1456 this was the tenement with two shops, of the chantry of Robert Chepe,¹¹ and from later deeds it can be identified as no. 4 Redcliff Street, like the Lamb on the side of the street away from the river.

The third deed is of c.1286–90 and concerns a property granted by John Knight, son of Alexander Knight, a former burgess, to Henry de Berewyck. Described as land with a cellar and all buildings upon, which Alexander had by gift from the abbot and convent of Keynsham, it was situated in the corner opposite the bridge of Avon and extended from the street ‘de la Redeclyve’ as far as the street of St Thomas, next to land that was once of the king in the street of the ‘Redeclyve’ and land that was once of Adam de Bones in St Thomas Street. An unspecified amount of landgable rent was payable to the lord of the fee and the witnesses to the deed included the bailiff of Arthur’s Fee.¹² In the 14th-century rental of the Fee of Arthur (Appendix) John de Berewyk held a property at the corner with St Thomas Street. This is likely to have been the property described in the deed, which being opposite the bridge and between the two streets must have been on the side away from the river (Fig. 1).

From these three identifications it can be argued that the long sequence of properties recorded in the rental of the Fee of Arthur is entirely on the south-east side of the street being walked, on the side away from the river. It has been shown elsewhere that a large part of the river frontage of the properties on the west side of Redcliff Street is built on land reclaimed from the river.¹³ The evidence from the rental may suggest that this side of the street is entirely reclaimed land. When the landgable rents of the Fee of Arthur were determined, Redcliff Street and the streets to the north-east were possibly on the strand, fronting directly on to the river. This would explain why those sides of the streets does not appear in the rental.

It is even possible to formulate a hypothesis for the southern boundary and limits of the Fee of Arthur. Of particular importance here is the deed of 1301 for the property that was later known as the Lamb. This was said to extend back to the Law Ditch, which from the likely shape of the property must have been running in a roughly east–west direction. This could not have been the ditch most commonly so called, that running from north to south between the Redcliff and Temple fees, and still a dominant feature in the topography of this part of the city. It is most likely to have been a ditch delimiting the southern boundary of the properties on the south side of Tucker Street. These were obliterated in the 1780s, prior to the survey by Ashmead published in 1828, but they are shown on a map made for the bridge trustees in advance of the compulsory purchases necessary for the construction of Bath Street.¹⁴ The alignment of this continuous property boundary ran approximately parallel to the river Avon and continued to the south-west across the west side of Thomas Street towards Redcliff Street.

South of Redcliff Street the same alignment was the southern limit of a tenement plot opposite the south end of Bristol bridge. The property granted by John Knight to Henry de Berewyck c.1286–90, extending between Redcliff Street and St Thomas Street, is likely to have comprised the property including the Bear inn at no. 2 Redcliff Street.¹⁵ From much later property records the southern boundary of no. 2 can be shown to be on that same alignment described above.¹⁶

10. *Great Red Book, Part 1*, 252.

11. BRO, P/StT/D/1.

12. *Ibid.* 00566(2).

13. R.H. Jones, *Excavations in Redcliffe 1983–5* (City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, 1986), 22–3.

14. Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, M.1671.

15. *Little Red Book*, I, 189–90: in 1383 the property was still known as the ‘Berewykesyn’. The name the Bear Inn possibly originated as a play on de Berewyk’s own name.

16. BRO, 18399(6).

There is therefore recorded in the landscape a continuous boundary which could mark the southern limit of the Fee of Arthur. The next task must be to establish the probable north-east and south-west limits of the fee. On the north-east there are two early boundaries that merit consideration: the first was a boundary referred to as the 'Law Ditch' in the 16th century. No. 7 Tucker Street, one of the properties belonging to Temple church, was part of a block of tenements extending back to a common boundary, referred to in a lease of 1587 as 'the Lawditch'.¹⁷ This was possibly the northwards continuation of the principal Law Ditch separating the properties in Temple Street from those in St Thomas Street (Fig. 1). As the limit of Arthur's Fee this would also be in accord with the information given in the responses to Kirby's Quest of 1285, where the fee was said to extend as far as the Law Ditch in the street of the fullers (above). The second possible north-east limit to the Fee of Arthur was the boundary between the parishes of St Thomas and Temple. This ran northwards from the Stallage Cross, itself probably an important parish boundary marker (Fig. 1).

The north-easterly extent of the Fee of Arthur might also be identified from correlating the number of properties recorded in the rental with the number of tenement plots recorded on the south side of the sequence of streets. In the rental 18 properties are recorded between the first entry and the tenement said to be in St Thomas Street. This might correspond to the 19–20 tenement plots visible on the Bath Street map, between the parish boundary on the north-east, and St Thomas Street on the south-west. This makes the parish boundary the more likely limit of the Fee of Arthur at the time of the rental, but it would remain possible that the Law Ditch to the south was an earlier boundary as indicated by the responses to Kirby's Quest, dating from perhaps prior to the extension of the Fee of Arthur northwards at an unknown date.

The south-west limit of the Fee of Arthur can only be surmised from the tenement boundaries on the east side of Redcliff Street intersecting with the westwards extension of the long southern boundary already identified. The fee's south-west limit would then be the boundary between nos. 10 and 11 on the east side of Redcliff Street and nos. 138 and 139 on the west side (Fig. 1). This correlates approximately with the twelve properties on the south side of Redcliff Street recorded in the rental.

As thus mapped the Fee of Arthur enclosed an area of river frontage centred on the crossing at Bristol bridge, but when were these arrangements put in place? We know that the fee existed by the late 13th century, when mentioned in the returns to Kirby's Quest (above). It could be considered to have originated as a possible bridgehead settlement or burh similar to that argued to have existed on the south side of London bridge at Southwark. The archaeology of Saxon Southwark is as little understood as that of Saxon Bristol, but the documentary evidence from the 10th-century Burghal Hidage for the '*Suthringa geworche*' has been taken to refer to the fortification of the men of Surrey, giving Southwark its name and distinguishing it from the defended city of Roman origin on the north bank of the Thames.

The conclusion that might seem inescapable therefore is that we are looking at a bridgehead settlement similar to that which has been proposed for Southwark. As at London a bridge guarded by a burh on each river bank was possibly designed to prevent Viking ships from sailing inland from tidal waters. Appropriately the place was named as 'the place of the bridge': 'brig-stowe', which with the Bristolian addition of the 'l' to follow the final vowel became 'Bristol'. Against such a hypothesis it might be argued that incursions by Viking longships up the tortuous route of the Avon and its gorge would have been unlikely, that the earliest evidence for Bristol comes from

17. T.P. Wadley, *Notes or abstracts of the wills contained in the Great Orphan Book of Wills* (Bristol, 1886), 249; BRO, P/Temple/Ab27, 28, 32, 68, 91, 123, 186.

the existence of a mint *c.* 1000, and that the building of fortified bridges was both primarily in the 9th century and has possibly been exaggerated.¹⁸

Some further support for the suggestion that a burh on the south side of the river was linked to one on the north bank comes from documentary evidence of the 14th century. In the returns made for the tallage in 1312, the ‘vico Fullonum’, within what has been shown to be the Fee of Arthur, was grouped with streets on the north side of the river, being regarded as part of the quarter of St Mary le Port; possibly the burh on the south side of the river was considered to be part of the same administrative unit as that on the north bank.¹⁹ The importance of the enclosed settlement on the south side of the river is attested both by the rental (Appendix) and by its having had its own bailiff.²⁰

All this amounts to an agenda for an archaeological investigation. And as it happens recently there have been two opportunities to test these hypotheses. The first is an excavation by Bristol and Region Archaeological Services in the yard behind nos. 10–22 Victoria Street. Excavations here²¹ have revealed a ditch *c.* 5 m in width running in an E–W alignment, just to the south of the property boundary that I have suggested may have marked the south side of Arthur’s Acre. The deposits through which the ditch was cut contained 12th-century pottery and its lower fills 13th-century material. The thicker upper fills contained 14th-century material as did the deposits overlying and sealing the ditch. Given the redating of early medieval pottery from Bristol that has taken place as a result of the dendrochronological dating from the Dundas Wharf site, scholars will wish to look critically at the dating of material from this site; but at present this ditch would appear to be of post-Conquest date.

The second relevant recent excavation is that by Oxford Archaeology on the former Courage brewery site, now renamed Finzel’s Reach. Here extensive excavations have revealed that the Law Ditch forming the boundary between the properties in Temple and St Thomas Streets is of late Saxon date: ‘the very late 10th – v early 11th century – probably *c.* 995–1020ish, so Saxon defended bridgehead now looks to be archaeo-scientifically proven’²² and is a recutting or reuse of an older river channel, though it should be added that the English Heritage adviser is ‘being cautious before going wholeheartedly for the late 10th/early 11th century date that Ben was suggesting’.²³

Before concluding there is one obvious question which I have not asked, who was Arthur? One possibility is that the name of the fee was taken from Richard Arthur who held the Fee of Arthur in 1285, or from predecessors of the same family, possibly the Arthur family of Clapton or Clopton in Gordano, a descendant of which held land within the area discussed here at a much later date.²⁴ In the early 12th century the family was granted lands in Gloucestershire by the Berkeley family, which was responsible for the development of most of the medieval town of Bristol south of the

18. S. Coupland, ‘The fortified bridges of Charles the Bald’, *Jnl. Medieval Hist.* 7 (1991), 12. Also relevant here is Haslam’s thesis that bridges were built in conjunction with the establishment of burhs as part of a systematic policy for the defence of Wessex against Viking seaborne attack, discussed most recently by David Harrison in *The Bridges of Medieval England* (Oxford, 2004), 41.

19. E.A. Fuller, ‘The Tallage of 6 Edward II (Dec 16, 1312) and the Bristol rebellion’, *Trans. BGAS* 19 (1894–5), 266.

20. I am grateful to Kath Thompson for the last suggestion.

21. Directed by Simon Roper, to whom I most grateful for the following information.

22. Quotation from correspondence from Ben Ford.

23. Quotation from correspondence from R.H. Jones, city archaeologist.

24. Wadley, *Wills*, 145: in 1471 the dwelling house of John Gaywode in Redcliff Street extended back to the Law Ditch (i.e. it was on the side away from the river) and was located next to a certain void place of Richard Arthur of Clopton on the south.

Avon, the Redcliff fee as part of its manor of Bedminster and the Temple fee on land it had granted to the Knights Templar.

Yet other possibilities are that the archaeological evidence from the excavations at 10–22 Victoria Street has provided a date for the initial filling of the ditch surrounding Arthur's Acre in the 12th century, and that the ditch was of Norman date, possibly part of Geoffrey of Coutances's initial plan for the fortification of Bristol. Coming from western Normandy he could well have had a knight named Arthur. Equally possible might be an attribution to Robert of Gloucester who is known to have updated the castle and could also have taken measures to protect the bridge.²⁵

This paper might be considered, along with the recent excavations, as 'work in progress'. The evidence has been put before you and the jury is out – but as with the Saxon town north of the river, the verdict may be a long time coming.

Acknowledgements

In concluding this edited version of my address as read, words of thanks are also needed. The brewers Scottish & Newcastle, as successors to Courage's and before that George's, asked me to provide a desktop study of the Courage brewery site prior to its redevelopment. The staff of Bristol and Region Archaeological Services and Oxford Archaeology provided information derived from recent excavations on and close to that site. Also of help were the city archaeologist for Bristol Robert Jones and, as always in such matters, the staff of the Bristol Record Office. Thanks are also owed to Sarah Gibson, archaeology officer for the London borough of Southwark for information on recent research in Southwark, to Drs John Juřica and Kath Thompson for their very helpful reading of the draft of the address, to Professor David Hinton for further insights into research on early medieval bridges, and finally to my dear wife Pamela for her support and comments on the text.

APPENDIX

Tenements in the Fee of Arthur and Stakepenny

Based on *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. F.B. Bickley (1900), I, 7–9

This appendix is a translation with some inferences added as a gloss to the original text. These added comments, interpolated in square brackets, relate mainly to properties that are omitted from the rental. These properties must have been located within the geographical extent of the Fee of Arthur, so why they were not liable for payment of rent is not at all clear.

The street of the fullers

No. 1: tenement in the street of the fullers between the tenement of John Douce and the tenement late of William Randulf, 2*d*.

[No. 2: tenement omitted – must be of William Randulf].

No. 3: tenement between the tenement of William Randulf and the tenement of John Tumbrel, 10*d*.

25. I am again grateful to Kath Thompson for these suggestions.

No. 4: tenement omitted – must be of John Tumbrel]

[May be a gap here – not certain]

[No. 5: tenement omitted – must be of Thomas Tropyng]

No. 6: tenement between the tenement of Thomas Tropyng and the tenement of Thomas Hemmynges, *4d.*

[No. 7: tenement omitted – must be of Thomas Hemmyng]

No. 8: tenement [must be of John le Whyte tailor] between the tenement of Thomas Hemmyng and the tenement of Henry Shupman, 1lb of cumin

No. 9: two tenements [one must be of Henry Shupman] that were of John Welyshote between the tenement of John le Whyte tailor and the tenement of Henry le Shupman, that the said Henry holds in fee, *4d.*

No. 10: tenement [of Henry Shupman] that was of Walter Cote between the tenement of Henry Shupman and the tenement of the master of the Hospital of St Katherine, that the said Henry holds, *6d.*

No. 11: tenement [of the master of the Hospital of St Katherine] between the tenement of the said master and the tenement of the said Henry, that the said master holds, *1½d.*

No. 12: tenement [of the master of the Hospital of St Katherine] between the tenement of the said master and the tenement of Henry Shupman, that the said master holds, *1½d.*

No. 13: tenement [of Henry Shupman] that was of Robert Bardeneye between the tenement of the said master on one side and the tenement of Christine widow of Walter Tropyng on the other, that Henry Shupman holds, *3d.*

Tucker Street

No. 1: three shops [of Christine daughter of Walter Tropyng] in Toukarestret between the tenement of Henry Shupman and the tenement of John le Whyte tailor and Isabella his wife, that Christine daughter of Walter Tropyng holds, *10½d.*

No. 2: three shops [must be of John le Whyte tailor and his wife Isabella] between the shop of the said Christine and the tenement of William de Axe, *10½d.*

No. 3: tenement [must be of William de Axe] between the tenement of John Whyte tailor and his wife Isabella and the tenement of John Douce, *8d.*

No. 4: two tenements [must be of John Douce] between the tenement of William de Axe and the tenement of Cecilie le [sic] Clerk, *16d.*

No. 5: tenement between the tenement of John Douce and the tenement of John Berewyk, that Cecilia la Clerk holds, *5d.*

St Thomas Street

No. 1: tenement in St Thomas Street [of John de Berewyk] between the tenement of Cecilia la Clerk and the tenement of Matilda Wachuset, that John de Berewyk holds, 12*d*.

Redcliff Street

No. 1: tenement in Redcliff Street between the tenement of John de Berwyk and the tenement of Walter Prentiz, that Matilda Wachuset holds, 12*d*.

No. 2: tenement between the tenement of Matilda Wachuset and the tenement of John Turtle, that Walter Prentiz holds, 4½*d*.

No. 3: tenement between the tenement of Walter Prentiz and the tenement of Stephen Pollesworthe, that John Turtle holds, 5*d*.

No. 4: tenement between the tenement of John Turtle and [the tenement of] John atte Weye, that Stephen de Pollesworth holds, 4*d*.

No. 5: tenement between the tenement of the said Stephen and the tenement of John Turtle, that John Atte Weye holds, 4*d*.

No. 6: tenement between the tenement of John Atte Weye and the tenement of Roger de Wynterbourn, that John Turtle holds, 7½*d*.

No. 7: tenement [must be of Roger de Wynterbourn] between the tenement of John Turtle and the tenement of John de Bodecoumbe, 1½*d*.

No. 8: tenement [must be of John de Bodecoumbe] between the tenement of Roger de Wynterbourn and the tenement of William Bakare skinner (*pelitarius*), 1½*d*.

No. 9: tenement between the tenement of John de Bodecoumbe and the tenement of John Romeseye, that William le Bakare skinner holds, 8½*d*.

[No. 10: tenement of John Romeseye not included]

No. 11: tenement between the tenement of John Romeseye and the tenement of John de Dene clerk, that William Rossel skinner [and Juliana his wife?] holds, 3½*d*.

No. 12: tenement [must be of John de Dene, clerk] in Redcliff Street between the tenement of William Rossel skinner and Juliana his wife and the tenement of Margaret Wombstranges, 2*s*. 3½*d*.